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AUTHOR Creighton, John A.; Harwood, Richard C.
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ABSTRACT

This volume reports on a study undertaken to determine views of college students themselves on civic life and politics and also follows four related studies and action research projects on the relationship between citizens and the political process. The central study was a series of 10 campus discussions in the focus group format, with college students in campuses across the nation. Those groups explored what college students believe it means to be a citizen, how students view politics today, how college students have learned what they know about politics and citizenship, how students would like politics practiced, and what opportunities students have for learning politics at the university. Key findings were that many students have concluded that politics is irrelevant holding a narrow view of politics; that students can imagine a different politics based on people coming together to find ways to talk and act on problems; and that students say they are not learning to practice politics as the political education they receive only reinforces everything they believe is wrong with politics. The volume closes by offering an agenda for changing how students view and participate in politics. An appendix describes the study methodology. (JB)

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POLITICS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH CITIZENSHIP

Politics is a real deflation.

Our role models have quit caring, so why should we?

WE DON'T SEE WHAT IT IS WE CAN DO.

WE NEED MORE GIVE AND TAKE.

YOU NEED TO HAVE A CLUE ABOUT SPECIFIC ISSUES AND THE BIG PICTURE.

Schools need to teach us how to get involved.

WE NEED TO ACCEPT MORE RESPONSIBILITY.

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Prepared for the Kettering Foundation by
John A. Creighton and Richard C. Harwood
The Harwood Group
January 1993

The Harwood Group is a public issues research and innovations firm located in Bethesda, Maryland. It works with public and private sector organizations to define complex public issues, understand the attitudes and perspectives of those individuals and groups affected by the issues, and develop policies, programs, and strategies that promote sustainable change.

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College Students Talk Politics

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Foreword

by David Mathews

In the 1992 presidential election, college students voted in numbers that recent history hadn't led us to expect. Of the eligible voters age 18-24, 45 percent went to the polls, as compared to 36 percent in 1988. Nonetheless, college students fell below the national average for participation. And we have to recognize that, once again, a sizable majority of students, even in a banner year, did not vote. Still the gains in student voting point toward possibility: we can do better. How? That is the subject of this study. Students can be responsible citizens but for that to happen more often than it does now, we cannot afford to wait until the next major election. And participation will have to mean more than voting.

To begin with, the attitudes of students toward politics have to be put in the context of the way citizens in America and, for that matter, citizens around the world, see politics.

E. J. Dionne, Jr. who wrote *Why Americans Hate Politics*, said after an international tour that he could make a fortune writing the same book for every country he visited. There is a worldwide revolution against political systems — not just particular ideologies but "systems" of professional politicians and their governments. People question whether these systems can be effective at solving their problems. The Kettering Foundation published, in 1991, a study by The Harwood Group that uncovered the anger — not apathy — that Americans on Main Street feel toward our own political system, one in which, citizens believe, a professional political class has forced them out of their rightful place. Elections don't seem to change these attitudes. As one of the aides of newly elected President Clinton acknowledged after their victory, "Most Americans still hate politics."

Harwood's study of Main Street also found evidence of an alternative form of politics in which citizens band together

in informal associations to work on common problems. These public activities range from programs to protect the environment to projects for keeping drug dealers off neighborhood streets. Yet people absolutely refuse to call this type of politics "politics" because the word has come to mean "those things that politicians do." America clearly has two types of politics: the formal politics of city councils, congressional legislation, and campaigns; and the informal politics of public forums, neighborhood associations, and citizen alliances. The politics that people don't call politics operates on principles that are almost the opposite of politics as usual. It is more deliberative and more pragmatically oriented toward solving problems. In fact, one of the objectives of these alternative projects is often to change the way a community goes about doing its political business. Politics *not* as usual is the politics of shared problem solving, the politics of community-building, the politics of country-defining.

What Students Say that Other Citizens Don't

Now Kettering has completed another study, again through the investigations of The Harwood Group, on how college students — America's next generation of leaders — feel about politics. Although students voice many of the same criticisms that other Americans do, there are important differences between the feelings of younger and older Americans. While adults showed anger and frustration, the next generation battles feelings of pessimism and alienation. Anger and frustration are less dangerous than pessimism and alienation. After all, anger can be put to constructive uses and frustration is filled with political energy that can be redirected. Pessimism and alienation do not have constructive possibilities. The difference in these feelings is profound, not merely semantic.

This is not to say that students don't care about the day-to-day issues that confront the country — about poverty or injustice or threats to the environment. Despite charges that the younger generation is totally preoccupied with personal self-interest, this study found that the younger generation can be no more uncaring than the older generation is apathetic. *The good news is that students care a great deal.* The bad news is that the younger generation can be even

more cynical than the present generation about the way the political system operates and far more pessimistic about their ability to change the situation for the better.

Students who care about issues are often at a loss about how to act on their concerns in an effective way. Many don't think the political system effectively addresses the problems they care about; and they are particularly turned off by the tone of politics today — by the extremes and negative tenor of what appears to be a grossly adversarial system with no regard for fair play. Like some people in the Main Street study, there are students who say the political system is "a system I'd never want to be a part of." Most alarming of all, this study found students saying, "politics has nothing to do with my life." The older generation seldom says politics has no effect on their lives (they are angry about the kinds of effects it does have). Young people who believe that politics has no effect have crossed the line from alienation to disengagement.

These attitudes are informed by what students see on the news, by their experiences on campus and — most of all — by the examples set by their elders.

A Loss of Democratic Memory?

Americans on Main Street worry that they are passing their cynicism on to the next generation. They *should* worry, because they are. Their attitudes are having a devastating effect on younger people. Americans now on Main Street are angry because they have a historic memory of a citizen's place in a democracy. They know that citizens should not be displaced by a professional political class. They remember what it means to be a citizen. So even when their anger causes them to walk away in protest from voting, they feel guilty. They have a sense of duty; they know they are supposed to vote. Students may not have such a democratic memory. Today's cynicism runs the danger of erasing more than two centuries of democratic consciousness.

Students see citizenship through a glass darkly. They often talk more about their rights, more about what government should do *for* them, than they do about their own responsibilities as citizens. They see citizenship, at best, as a deferred responsibility, something for after graduation.

Even when they talk about citizenship, they say things such as "being a citizen is your God-given right. *Politics doesn't have anything to do with being a citizen*" (emphasis added). That is an astounding and seemingly confused statement. What students mean, when they say things like this, is that being a good person is enough. They don't seem to "remember" that a citizen, by definition, is someone active in the public life of community and country — that citizens are more than individuals living responsible private lives.

These attitudes stand out in sharp contrast to the attitudes of people around the world who are busy challenging and changing political systems. People in other countries are trying to find new ways to solve old problems. Main Street Americans are also doing a great deal of "new thinking" about alternatives to politics as usual. Since students are often in the vanguard of world revolutions and new thinking, it is only natural to ask how much Americans in college know about these efforts to change political practice.

Students may have to reeducate themselves *after* college in order to take their place in the democratic revolutions going on all about them. They may have to acquire what a democratic memory should have provided. For example, students' imagination of what they might do in politics is largely confined to what they might do as individuals. That is one of the reasons they often feel powerless. As an Oklahoma State student confessed, "we . . . still tend to do things that are more individualistic." A democratic memory would remind students that very little success in politics has come from individuals acting alone.

A Latent Instinct for a Better Kind of Politics

Even though students in the study were adamant in their views of politics, it would be a mistake to conclude that they will never change their minds. Attitudes aren't yet set in concrete; students are open to thinking about a different kind of politics. While they may not normally spend much time thinking about politics, when pressed on the subject, they say things such as, "there needs to be a better way." What they see happening in politics is different from what they would like to see. When given an opportunity in the focus group discussions that the Harwood group conducted, students eagerly seized the chance to imagine what politics

could be. Watching students talk about democracy was not, as someone said about watching the collapse of democratic government in Europe a generation ago, like seeing the lights go out all over the world. Sometimes the lights go on. This study found that students have retained a remarkable "instinct" for democratic practice; there is a buried civic consciousness in students.

The question of what *should* happen in politics took students a while to answer because they lacked a common language to name what was on their minds. (They noted, with regret, this absence of a common language.) In time, however, the conversation centered on the most basic element of politics, the political debate. The debates students hear often appall them. A Wake Forest student complained, "People are very opinionated in my classes. There is no moderation at all and [the discussion] gets totally out of bounds." On or off campus, political debates seem to be dominated by the extremes. These diatribes don't strike students as being capable of resolving the country's major problems. As one Morgan State student observed, "There are no solutions discussed; it is all rhetoric."

These students knew what was missing in the political discussions they criticized — a diversity of perspectives, listening, and the careful weighing of trade-offs. They could even identify what they would need to practice a different kind of politics — the ability to keep an open mind, to stand in another person's shoes, to change, and to make decisions with others. There was no indication that any of these students had studied the theory of deliberative democracy; yet they could describe the essential characteristics of a more deliberative kind of politics, a politics in which people talk and think together in the ways that enable them to act together.

Who Is Responsible?

If some students demonstrate, after reflection, an instinct for democratic politics, why does pessimism and alienation threaten their generation? Blaming the "older generation" for their attitudes is too weak an answer. More important than deciding who's to blame is to figure out who can help better the situation. Though the students in the focus group discussions did not think of themselves as sending mes-

sages to anyone, their comments have a great deal to offer political leaders who worry about the mood of the public, citizens who care about the next generation of citizens, institutions of higher learning that pride themselves on educating leaders and — most of all — students who don't like to be called another "Me Generation."

Students Themselves

Fundamental change will depend on students claiming more responsibility for their own political education. Unfortunately, however, there are obstacles that stand in the way of some students. Some talked about external conditions, they believe will have to be met *before* they can make a difference. Some mentioned wanting others to provide them with opportunities to participate; some looked for assurances that others would listen before they would be willing to speak out politically. These expectations are ultimately self-defeating. Recall Vaclav Havel's observation:

> *When a person behaves in keeping with his conscience, when he tries to speak the truth and when he tries to behave as a citizen even under conditions where citizenship is degraded, it may not lead to anything, yet it might. But what surely will not lead to anything is when a person calculates whether it will lead to something or not.*

Although there are exceptions, American students need to be more aware of the power and possibility that lie in their own innate capacity for common action. We cannot afford a political culture in which citizens think of themselves as victims — a culture that robs people, young and old alike, of a sense of their capabilities.

This report's message for students — and it is a message that came from students — is the most important of all. It is simply this: take responsibility for your own political being. Effective politics does not begin with people who wait for someone else to empower them. On the contrary, by claiming responsibility, people create their own power, which grows out of their unique experiences and talents. Effective citizens develop a sense that "they are the solution." As people begin to act, they come to see themselves

as "agents" rather than as bystanders or victims. More student organizations need to experience the power that comes from claiming responsibility.

When students do claim responsibility for their political being — when they seize the moment rather than wait for an opportunity or for someone to listen — the results can be dramatic. For instance, a pre-med student at Penn State reacted to the abortion debate by getting other students to join him in a new organization they call "Pro Solution." Watching the abortion controversy, he had concluded, "Most people were fighting one way — lobbying for one interest — and no one was trying to solve anything." He and his fellow students did not respond as individuals; they acted collaboratively to form an organization that now takes on a major issue each semester. Their larger objective, however, is not just to solve specific problems, it is "to show how politics should be done," that is, "to place the control of social policies back in the hands of the people."

Students' interest in learning a new set of political skills indicates a need to bring back to campus the public forums where those skills are developed. The American Association of University Students has a project to do just that. They use the discussion guides of the National Issues Forums (NIF) to acquaint students with the way the public sees issues, to teach them about making choices together, and to show them how they can create common ground for political action.

Whether undergraduates have a literal "instinct" for democracy, or not, is unimportant. Their capacity to envision a different kind of politics is filled with potential. Students know that "discussion is real important in making changes," and that "you need to get people with different ideas together and work out the problem." They are not ignorant about such principles. *It just doesn't occur to them without some reflection, that they are applicable in politics.* The study quotes an Oklahoma student who confirmed: "These are things [principles] that we've known all along. We all know that you can compromise and things like that, but it took participating [in the discussion] to realize that [working together] was needed if you want the government working."

Higher Education

What about higher education's responsibility for students' knowledge of politics and for the attitudes they develop? On the one hand, most institutions are pledged to produce a new generation of citizens and leaders. On the other, there are those who deny that politics or political leadership can or should be taught in a university: higher education can only, should only, teach about politics as a subject. (That is the responsibility of the department of political science.) Otherwise, so this argument goes, preparation for politics comes as preparation for all of life, through the liberal arts, through a common or eclectic body of readings and, perhaps, through a bit of community service.

While this may be the best prescription for a political education, students don't seem to think so. In fact, students aren't sure their schools are capable of providing them with a political education. The students in this study did not believe the existing curriculum or any of the proposed reforms of undergraduate education (more liberal arts, more common or diverse readings, or even community service) would, by themselves, prepare them to be public leaders.

Students questioned a stronger liberal arts requirement because they didn't think political education came primarily through knowledge about things. They had reservations about proposals for more required readings because they didn't think they could get the skills they wanted from reading books — even if they all read the same books. Some even questioned community service, not because it wasn't appealing, but because it seemed to be done for personal satisfaction and was more service than politics. The implication in what students said about the skills they needed is that a political education has to be grounded in practice — and then aided by reflection and knowledge. Education for citizenship would have to be more like the hands-on education for medicine or the performing arts than the passive education of sitting in a classroom.

Although the students in the study initially doubted that their institutions could do much to help them acquire the skills to practice a better form of politics, on reflection they wondered why their schools didn't try to do more. As a Siena student said, "The college should challenge us directly

. . . [it] should sharpen our skills to be good citizens. . . ."

The message to higher education in what students are saying is that whether you intend to or not, you teach politics. Institutions of higher learning certainly affect what students know *about* politics. Sometimes they learn what politics is in class. Most of the time they learn politics from the way it is practiced on campus. And students don't like what they see. Not only are debates dominated by extreme positions, they say people are punished for not being partisan zealots. Students would not like to see less emotion, but they would like to see less acrimony. They wish there were more discussions where people *listened* as well as talked. They want to see more moderation, more appreciation for what they call the "gray" or indeterminate nature of political issues. They think there should be more respect, more inclusion of different perspectives — not for the sake of being tolerant but for a very practical reason — to have a better understanding of the whole. Students want to know more about what the trade-offs are in the "solutions" they hear touted. They want to know how to make compromises with integrity and create common ground for action.

Higher education does not deny that it is responsible for teaching *about* politics. What students say, however, suggests that higher education only teaches about one kind of politics — politics as usual. Students do not seem to learn anything about politics in the broader sense — whether that is the classical concept of politics or the politics of the recent citizens' revolutions in Europe and Latin America or the alternative politics now practiced on America's Main Streets. Students learn that politics is for reacting to what the powers that be have already decided. Politics is understood as a series of transactions to control existing resources. Most students don't seem to know about the kind of politics that *creates* political goods, that aims to *transform* a community.

While there is reason for concern over the factual information students lack, there should be even greater concern that they don't know the basic precepts of democracy — for instance, that there are certain things citizens must do (such as defining the public's interest) before governments and politicians can do their jobs. Students know a great deal

about what corrupts the political system, but we forgot to give them a repair manual. We haven't told them, for example, how deliberation increases the chances that self-governing will be self-correcting.

Institutions of higher learning also affect students' attitudes toward politics. Unfortunately the campus seems to reinforce, perhaps unwittingly and certainly not alone, society's worst attitudes about politics. The worst of all is students' perception that "politics has nothing to do with my life." Most students do not entertain the possibility that politics is more than politicians and governments and is, in fact, an aspect of all of life — including their own. Politics is seen as a specialized part of life, and that convinces students they don't belong in politics.

In sum, higher education runs the danger of perpetuating a narrow and constricting understanding of the political, of modeling, rather than challenging, the conventional wisdom. And it appears to leave students without concepts or language to explore what is political about their lives.

Citizens

So this new study, like the earlier report on Main Street attitudes, finds that all is not well in our body politic. We must do better. While no one knows when the levels of popular cynicism, distrust, frustration, anger, and pessimism will become toxic, everybody knows that these are the hypertension and bad cholesterol of political biology. It is not enough to report these feelings. The people who take their citizenship seriously — all of us — have to try to counter these toxins. We have to look for better answers than we have now.

The first answer is that there is no one remedy. There are things, however, that citizens can do to help, in both large and small ways. A good prescription for the present generation is to watch out for cynicism and negativism. It is catching. The message to the political class is to watch out for the young anti-voters. Cynicism turned to pessimism is going to make it even harder for representative government to work. The message to the people who practice a citizens' politics — who build associations to solve common problems — is to take a student to lunch. That is, integrate students into what you are doing; join students (like the

Pro-Solution group) in what they are doing.

If students want to learn about the kind of politics that does have a place for citizens, there is no better place to learn than from the citizens who practice that sort of politics. Why not create all kinds of alliances between students and the hundreds of citizen associations in the country that are leading the "new thinking" about politics? For example, The National Civic League, where many of the new kinds of community-wide associations assemble, could create an alliance with COOL, a student-created federation of campus-based service programs.

Looking Ahead

The great "discovery" of this study was students' ability to describe what politics should be *and* how it might become more like what they wanted it to be. Like the discovery of penicillin, it was somewhat accidental. The analytical sessions Richard Harwood and his colleagues began became, in time, real political discussions. When pushed by questions like, "What would you do differently?" students took up the exchange, often forgetting about the research team. In this setting, students proved to be amazingly articulate in describing the kind of skills they need to change political practice at its core.

Of course, students who discover that they are political creatures able to change relations and solve problems by the way they talk with and engage others will, like the citizen on Main Street, want to find better connections between *their* politics and the formal political system. Though frustrating, that is a healthy issue and one that citizens everywhere struggle with.

Surely students deserve more occasions when they can discover in themselves and on their own campuses what this study found on a few campuses and with relatively small groups of students — a recognition that change will take hard work on their part. That recognition can stimulate commitment. One student said that what she learned from the Harwood discussions was that "we have to make the effort." That is the ultimate lesson in political education.

Even in an era of Draconian budget reduction that has brought on a new wave of cost cutting, American higher

education still has a great deal of non-financial capital. While there are costs, institutions can "afford" to be outspoken, controversial, exacting, and demanding of excellence. What our institutions *cannot* afford to be is irrelevant to students who are struggling to find their place in politics and more — to find a politics with a place for them. American higher education cannot afford to be irrelevant to a self-governing nation whose strength is never more than the collective strength of its citizens.

David Mathews
Dayton, Ohio
December 7, 1992

Preface

The Kettering Foundation commissioned *College Students Talk Politics* as part of its long-standing commitment and work to improve the practice of politics in America and indeed in nations around the world. The report is specifically part of the Public Leadership Education (PLE) project, one of the Foundation's ongoing program areas. The PLE project is devoted to understanding how young Americans learn about civic life and responsibilities — and how that is supported in colleges and universities.

Considerable work precedes this report, including a six-volume series of essays that explore a range of ideas and issues concerning the preparation of young Americans for civic life. These volumes are: *Preparing College Students for Their Civic Roles* (Volume I); *Learning about Civic Life* (Volume II); *Skills for Democratic Citizenship* (Volume III); *Practicing Citizenship* (Volume IV); *Building Civic Communities* (Volume V); and *The Role of Citizen Leaders* (Volume VI). In addition, the Kettering Foundation has published the book, *Higher Education and the Practice of Democratic Politics: A Political Education Reader*, edited by Bernard Murchland who holds the Trumball G. Duvall Chair in Philosophy at Ohio Wesleyan University. This study, *College Students Talk Politics*, was undertaken to gain the perspective of college students themselves on civic life and politics.

College Students Talk Politics also follows four related studies and action research, projects undertaken by The Harwood Group for the Kettering Foundation on the relationship between citizens and the political process. *Citizens and Politics* (June 1991) revealed how Americans view politics and what they are seeking from the political process; two additional studies were: *The Public's Role in the Policy Process: A View from State and Local Policymakers* (July 1989); and *Citizens and Policymakers in Community*

Forums; Observations from the National Issues Forums (June 1990). The action research project, which is now in progress, seeks to design and test new ways for citizens and public officials to work together in constructive ways.

The Kettering Foundation plans to follow the release of this report with several specific projects to address the challenges that college students themselves identify in learning to practice politics. These efforts include promoting the use of a new discussion guide *Politics for the Twenty-First Century: What Should Be Done on Campus?* on college campuses and in classrooms across the country that will engage college students in exploring different "choices," or alternatives, for learning and practicing politics. In addition, The Harwood Group is designing a tool to assist college students to initiate conversations on their own in order to help them discover their inherent interests in, and capacities for, practicing politics.

This report, *College Students Talk Politics*, is based on a series of ten campus discussions, or focus groups, with college students on campuses across the nation. In these campus discussions, we explored the following questions:

- What do college students believe it means to be a citizen?
- How do college students view politics today?
- How have college students come to learn what they know about politics and citizenship?
- How would college students like to see politics practiced?
- What opportunities do college students see for learning politics at the university?

Focus groups are particularly well suited for this type of study as they allow researchers to learn not only "what," in this case, college students think about the topic of politics, but "why" they hold those views and "how" they think about them. This kind of information is often impossible to gather through public opinion surveys. In surveys, for instance, questions need to be predefined for respondents to answer; citizens are unable to discuss issues and then reconsider their own views; and limited amounts of new information can be entered into a discussion for respondents to consider. Still, it must be pointed out that the observations that emerge from focus groups need to be

viewed, strictly speaking, as hypotheses that should be verified by scientifically reliable methods in order to be considered definitive. More information about the methodology used to conduct this study is found in the "Appendix."

Acknowledgments

A number of people played key roles in making this publication possible. David Mathews, Kettering Foundation president, was the driving force behind this project; it reflects his continuing desire to understand better the nature of politics in America today, to find ways to improve democratic practices, and the particular importance he sees in connecting young Americans and the political process. Suzanne W. Morse, director of programs at the Kettering Foundation, managed the project for the Foundation; this study is a sign of her long-term commitment and leadership on the Public Leadership Education project. Robert J. Kingston, senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, provided keen insights and editorial comments on numerous drafts; reports of all kinds can only improve with his attention. Michael J. Perry, Molly W. Sonner, and Bill G. Schmitt, of The Harwood Group, were involved in all aspects of this study; their tireless efforts in conducting the primary and background research, willingness to engage in long discussions, and thoughtful comments were vital to this project. Other people who should be thanked include Kate Sheaffer for her work in coordinating outreach and distribution; Robert E. Daley and George Cavanaugh for their efforts in producing this publication; and Betty Frecker, for her copy editing.

Introduction

College Students and the Future of Politics

Today the nation faces a host of challenges — on the economy, environmental protection, education, and health care. Yearly national deficits and mounting debts weigh on the nation, too. Many of these and other issues have long-term implications, and intergenerational dimensions: the *young* people of America at some point will be forced to confront them. Yet this study, prepared for the Kettering Foundation by The Harwood Group, suggests that many college students have concluded that politics — the very process by which these problems will be addressed — is irrelevant. College students interviewed in this study say that most everything they have learned about politics, most everything they see and hear involving politics, makes them believe that it is not about solving problems. Instead, it is individualistic, divisive, negative, and often counter-productive to acting on the ills of society. So now, at a time in their lives when students might be preparing to be the political participants and leaders of tomorrow, they are turning their backs on the political process.

Now, of course we witnessed an uptick in voter turnout among 18-24-year-olds in the 1992 presidential election. But what does that mean? It suggests that college students, and other young Americans, may be hopeful about reengaging in the political process; but, for that to occur, the college students interviewed for this study say they want to practice a different kind of politics. The risk we run today is that we will return to politics as usual with the same vengeance and energy that we have experienced in recent years. That will only deepen college students' sense of the irrelevance of politics.

Students can, in fact, imagine a different kind of politics, based on different political practices. This study suggests that, with some fundamental changes in the way that politics is practiced today, students will seek opportunities

to become involved. They are concerned about the challenges facing the country and they do want to find ways to solve its problems.

Generally, the key findings of the study are:

- ***Many students have concluded that politics is irrelevant.*** The students in this study hold a narrow view of politics. They see only three ways that they might participate — through individual actions like voting and signing petitions, by joining interest groups, or in protesting. They fundamentally reject the political value of each of these. The term that best captures the view of many students toward the political process now is "the politics of pessimism."

The term that best captures the view of many students toward the political process now is "the politics of pessimism."

- ***Students can imagine a different politics.*** When the discussion about the practice of politics is changed slightly, the students we interviewed talk about a different kind of politics — one based on people coming together to find ways to talk and act on problems. They say that several distinctive practices are needed to make politics more engaging, but they are practices that they do not associate with the political process today.
- ***Students say that they are not learning to practice politics.*** Students in these campus conversations assert that the political education they receive only reinforces everything they believe to be wrong with politics. This includes what colleges and universities are teaching them as well as what they have seen and experienced through the course of their lives.

This is where students are now in relationship to the political process: alienated, searching for something different that they cannot seem to find, and confounded as to where to turn for alternatives. While some observers of American politics and culture might see little cause for alarm — saying that college is "just that time of life for people to be disengaged" — this research suggests that worse may be yet to come. For the students participating in this study hold a narrow view of politics, citizenship, and the potential of both.

The challenge for the future, of reengaging young Americans in the political process, is never more clear than when

one considers the differences between the attitudes described by students participating in this study and those expressed by citizens in *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, an earlier report of the Kettering Foundation prepared by The Harwood Group. Indeed, while the voices of students and citizens, at first glance, may sound similar, the differences are important:

- ***While citizens are frustrated, students feel resigned.*** Americans, the earlier study found, are angry when it comes to politics today — they feel "pushed out" of the political process. Students, however, seem resigned to the conclusion that politics is what it is, that politics always has been this way, and that it may always be something that has little relevance to their lives.
- ***While citizens are seeking to reengage in politics, students see little purpose in ever becoming engaged.*** Citizens say that they desperately want to be back in the political process, but they cannot *find* a place to participate. College students, however, are convinced that politics does not solve problems and so there is little reason, beyond personal satisfaction, to participate.
- ***While citizens argue that politics should be different, students seem to be missing a context for thinking about politics.*** Citizens have a clear sense that conditions shaping the political process should be different. Students, however, accept them as the norm. Only when they are given the opportunity to *imagine* a new set of political practices do they see possibilities for change.
- ***While citizens have a strong sense of civic duty, students see primarily entitlement.*** Citizens believe that they are an essential part of the political process and, for it to work effectively, they *must* participate. Students, however, view citizenship almost exclusively in terms of individual rights. The connection, in their view, between citizenship and politics is tenuous at best.

The views expressed by college students in these campus conversations bring to mind the woman from Philadelphia in the earlier study, *Citizens and Politics*, who voiced a deep

concern about the message she and others might be sending to young people by abstaining from the political process. She asked, "Are we telling our children that we can't have a say? Are they already turned off before they are adults?" Students in fact do seem turned off from the political process. The woman from Philadelphia, and others who share her view, may see their gravest concerns become reality.

The challenge, then, facing the country is this: how to educate young Americans so that they see the relevance of politics in their lives. This is a difficult challenge; students participating in this study say that the political education they receive today — in and out of the classroom — prepares them only to practice politics as usual; this study suggests that students are so disenchanted with the current practice of politics that, without a different context for thinking about politics — one that is about people working together to solve problems — any efforts to engage them may well fall on deaf ears. Still it is a challenge worth accepting. The hopes of the next generation, as well as the future of the nation, depend on it.

Students themselves argue that they need to learn a new set of political skills: how to understand issues; how to hold political discussions; and how to make decisions with others.

What does this study suggest about how to engage America's young people in politics? Students themselves argue that they need to learn a new set of political skills: how to understand issues; how to hold political discussions; and how to make decisions with others. But skills alone are insufficient. Students also need opportunities to put political skills to use in real situations, and to discover new possibilities for the potential of politics. They need to learn that people can work together to make a difference; that their elders *do* care; and that politics *can* create change. In addition, the narrow view of politics and citizenship held by many students participating in this study suggests that students must explore further the philosophical underpinnings of democracy: that politics is about how society agrees on social compacts that honor and protect rights such as freedom of speech — one of the many rights to which students now believe they are entitled — and that citizens themselves must accept responsibilities in working out these compacts and accepting the costs and trade-offs of our decisions. In all of this, educators — teachers, parents, and adults in general — must take note of what they say about politics and the examples that they set; the

cynicism that is being passed on to the next generation must be countered if young Americans are ever to view politics as being relevant to their lives. And, ultimately, America's young people must realize that they themselves can act to improve our democratic health; they must be the agents of change.

As different ways for educating young people about politics are pursued, it is important that patience and persistence guide the efforts. The attitudes that students hold toward politics are indeed stark, but there is good news: these observations suggest that students will engage in politics if they are challenged to develop new skills and if they see opportunities to put these skills to use. Students do care about the world around them; they make that very clear in these campus conversations. But to ignite their interest in politics, they must believe that the political process can, in fact, create change.

College students have learned to participate in the political process in only three ways — through the individual actions of voting, by joining interest groups, and in protesting. Each of these inspire only pessimism.

Chapter I
Politics of Pessimism

Students in these campus conversations have come to see three roles for themselves in politics, all of them being individual actions: voting, signing petitions, or writing letters; joining interest groups; and protesting. They fundamentally reject the political value of each of these, and often believe that current political practices produce negative consequences within our political process. Indeed in each of these actions, students hear only a message of pessimism —that citizen action is irrelevant to the course of politics. The view of many students now can best be described as a politics of pessimism.

Voting, Writing, and Signing

The students interviewed for this study say, first and foremost, that the way Americans participate in politics is by acting individually — through such actions as voting, signing petitions, or writing letters. An Oklahoma State woman reflecting on the conversation in her group said, "Even though we know deep down that we need to [work with others] we still tend to do things that are more individualistic." A Morgan State man remarked, "I think that individuals are concerned about individual politics." Students say that such actions as voting fulfill a *personal* need to participate, but perhaps not much more. As a Siena College student commented, "I think [people] just satisfy themselves as individuals. They feel like, well, 'I did something' and they can live with that. Then it's back to doing their daily routine."

Notably absent from the political actions named by students was any mention of working with others to discuss, understand, and act on problems. The comments made in the Wake Forest discussion group were typical. One student in that conversation said that when it comes to participating in politics, "The number-one way is voting." Alternatively, a Wake Forest woman remarked that citizens can participate by "writing your congressman in support of something." And another Wake Forest student suggested, "Writing letters to the editor." Students in the University of Michigan discussion also listed practices such as signing petitions and making donations to campaigns and interest groups. On the Gonzaga University campus, students responded with virtually the same litany: "Voting," said one man. "Writing your congressman," remarked another. The possibilities described by students in these three groups echoed responses of students across the country — from Siena College to Oklahoma State, from Morgan State to UC-Berkeley, and from Florida State to Colorado College.

Yet, when it comes to these political actions, the message that many students seem to be receiving is that they are of little consequence in having a voice in the political decisions made in this country. Three important messages of pessimism are lodged in the minds of students today.

Message of Pessimism #1: The Sight of Indifference. "Citizens don't feel it's important to vote or to voice their opinions. It's like they don't care anymore," remarked a Gonzaga University woman. This is a stark message that many students seem to be taking to heart. As a Wake Forest woman commented, "People don't think one vote can make a difference." This idea was put forth in the UC-Berkeley group, too. "I think that some people are becoming more aware of how futile it is to try and change anything through electoral politics," said one student. In the Florida State campus discussion a man said, "Look at the last election. What was voter turnout, 30 percent. What's that say?" A classmate answered saying, "I think people feel that their vote isn't going to make that big of a difference. I mean, what is one vote going to do? That's why I've never voted, *ever*." A University of Michigan student reflected on similar comments made in her discussion by remarking, "I think declining voter turnout says something. People just don't feel that it is important. Or if they do, it's not worth

I think declining voter turnout says something. People just don't feel that it is important. Or if they do, it's not worth whatever time it takes to vote.

– University of Michigan student

whatever time it takes to vote."

Comments coming from students interviewed from coast to coast are sending out a warning: students are following the example they are being given by their elders, their "role models," in politics. "I think it starts with your role models. You see that they've quit caring, so why should we care," remarked a University of Michigan man. "It starts with your parents," asserted a University of Minnesota woman, adding, "If your parents don't care about politics, you're not going to care." A Wake Forest student said, "People have lost interest. There are not enough people out there voting or saying what they want." A University of Minnesota man commented, "Most American people don't think that anything is ever going to happen from their efforts [to participate], so they don't take the time." A woman in the Wake Forest group concluded, "It's just the way society is now. Everything is so fast-paced, and people aren't willing to take the time to be informed about [the issues] and the candidates." This prevailing attitude among students led another Wake Forest student to describe politics as, in his words, "a vicious cycle." He explained: "We say we can't make a difference and so we don't vote. Then things are bad so we don't feel like we can make a difference. It keeps going around and around and nothing ever happens. I think in that way we allow things to get worse and worse." And a UC-Berkeley man summed up the sentiments of many of his peers, saying:

> People older than us are complacent, so people our age have given up. Now it's kind of like there is not a lot of action going on.

It starts with your parents, if your parents don't care about politics, you're not going to care.

— University of Minnesota woman

Message of Pessimism #2: Legacy of Negative Campaigns. Students also say they reject voting because nearly everything they see associated with campaigns and elections is negative. Of course, many political observers are quick to point out that negative campaigning works — it is proven by the polls and by the candidates who win elections, they say. There are many political observers who assert that it is seldom a question of *if* a political candidate should go negative against his or her opponent, but *when* to start.

Yet despite those who insist that negative campaigns do win elections, students interviewed for this study suggest that these campaigns are inherently manipulative and dam-

aging to the political process. A Gonzaga University woman remarked with indignation that negative campaign tactics "just play off people's emotions and ignorance." A classmate added, "I think a lot of times politicians run on the emotions of people." When these and other students were pushed to consider whether they think emotions and values have a place in politics, they replied, yes. But, too often campaigns cross the line, they say, using values to play on people's fears. As an Oklahoma State woman observed, when talking about how some issues are framed, "That's just another way of scaring people into voting how you want them to. To call [other candidates] socialists is just a scare tactic." And a Colorado College woman remarked, "[Politicians] focus on emotional issues that push our buttons — not on issues."

Campaigns no longer seem relevant to many students. "All campaigns are is people trying to smear their competition," commented a Morgan State student. "[Campaigns] are just back and forth arguing and putting down the other person," said a Gonzaga University woman. "We just don't want to see all of this negative campaigning anymore," added one of her classmates. And a Wake Forest student said, "In the last couple of elections, it's no longer 'let's have a fair debate.' It's, 'let's see who can slam the other [candidate] the worst.' I don't like that at all." A Florida State student described campaigns on campus as mimicking campaigns for public office: "When I was a freshman, I went to a debate between two guys running for [student-body] president, and it turned into a joke. Everybody was laughing at these guys because all they were doing was making fun of each other. They weren't talking about issues, they were just slamming on each other." He concluded, "There needs to be less mudslinging, but I don't know how to change that." Indeed, the students interviewed question whether the style of today's campaigns enables citizens to learn anything about political issues facing the country or the candidates. As a Siena College man remarked in the discussion with his classmates:

> Look at the [1988 presidential] race. Everyone was out to show the faults of other candidates. I think that's totally ridiculous. If you want to be elected you should show your own values, not

[Politicians] focus on emotional issues that push our buttons — not on issues.

– Colorado College woman

everyone else's faults.

The media are viewed by many students in these campus discussions as accomplices to campaigns that stress the negative over substance. "I think the media will tell you so much about a candidate that has nothing to do with the issues. Like whether he smoked a joint in college or whatever. People don't know what to do when it comes up to the election because they just get sick of all the hoopla and they just don't care. They just get sick and burned out by it," asserted an Oklahoma State man. A Florida State woman said, "The media are more concerned about who the candidate is sleeping with than what his stands are on economics." A man from Morgan State made a similar judgment when he commented, "The media goes out of their way to find something negative" on public officials and those seeking office. A Colorado College woman remarked about the media coverage of this year's presidential election, "There's a *National Enquirer* mentality about this campaign — it's just sickening." A Gonzaga University woman went so far as to say, "I think what's wrong with politics in general is the media. They don't report on the issues. I don't think that they report what some candidates have to say because the media don't like it. So I think the media play a big part in the problems we have with politics." A Colorado College woman remarked, "Politics is controlled by the media. . . . They don't show people the plethora of ideas and philosophies." Another Gonzaga University student said that media coverage, "is biasing America." The Gonzaga University student continued, "It's giving what [the media] view as right for America. Instead, we want to hear everything."

The media are more concerned about who the candidate is sleeping with than what his stands are on economics.

– Florida State woman

Message of Pessimism #3: Public Officials Only Placate the Public. Most students participating in this study believe that public officials merely placate citizens in order to pursue their own agendas. And that belief undermines students' desires to be a part of the political process. "Politicians tell you one thing and then change once they're in office," said a Morgan State University woman. "It seems like all around election time here come these politicians promising things, then once elections are over they disappear. And once they are elected they're gone, until the next term rolls around and they're saying the same stuff," said a University of Michigan woman. "Why vote? They're

just going to do what they want," asserted a Wake Forest student. Indeed, students are of the opinion that public officials act primarily in their own self-interest. Another Wake Forest student observed about public officials, "They do whatever's best for themselves." A UC-Berkeley man commented, "It seems like [public officials] say certain things just to cater to some people's needs, but they're not really following through." And a Morgan State man remarked, "They don't look out for the people that they're supposed to be looking out for." Expressing much the same sentiment, an Oklahoma State man said, "They do whatever will profit them the most."

Many students interviewed for this study believe that such self-interest leads public officials to forget why they sought public office in the first place. "They lose sight of their goals," said a Siena College student, suggesting that public officials initially set out in politics with the interests of the general public in mind. She said, "It's such a struggle to get where they are, by the time they get there they forget why they even tried." An Oklahoma State man asserted that public officials have one concern once they are in office: "Politicians just want to stay in office — that's their job. They want to keep their job." And a Colorado College woman said about people who seek public office, "A lot of them are afraid to buck the system — Perot is a case in point. He pulled out because he didn't want to mess things up. But a lot of people want things messed up."

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– Colorado College woman

Students now feel that a gap separates public officials and citizens. In the Florida State discussion a man commented, "I think [public officials] consider themselves the cultural elite. I think there's such a . . ." he paused a moment and several classmates chimed in, "gap," prompting him to conclude, "yeah, such a gap that the types of people who are politicians can't get themselves to meet the people at the bottom of the heap." A woman from Morgan State put it this way, "There's *no* interaction between those making decisions and those being affected by them. There's no interaction." A Colorado College woman remarked, "We don't relate to politicians. They are old and from a different time. Their old and traditional ideas are not ours." A UC-Berkeley student said, "People in politics are getting farther and farther away from the common people." All of this has led many students to hold out little hope for playing a

meaningful role in politics. As a Wake Forest student concluded: "The public has less and less to do with it. It's more who's up there," he said, referring to public officials, "they're all controlling it. We're all sitting down here watching it happen."

Government works very slow for a lot of citizens and smaller groups who want to say something.

– UC-Berkeley student

Joining Interest Groups

Students interviewed for *College Students Talk Politics* say that joining an organized interest is essential for citizens to have their voice heard in politics. As a Siena College man said, "A lot of people don't have their voice heard, like Joe average in Montana. He can't do *anything* unless he learns how to be part of some organized group." An Oklahoma State man explained that it is important to be part of an organized interest because these groups have an impact. "Most of the time special interests have control. They get their share of what they want." When asked why he believes this, he remarked, "If there is enough interest shown by an interest group, the leaders will try to appease those people." Indeed, a UC-Berkeley student observed, "Government works very slow for a lot of citizens and smaller groups who want to say something."

Thus, beyond voting, students say that "joining interest groups," as a Morgan State man said, "is what drives politics." "If you look around the nation, if you read any magazine, you'll see that so many public interest groups exist. If you really want to make a change, join up with one," remarked a Siena College student. An Oklahoma State student made a similar point. He said that the way to participate in making decisions on political issues is to "figure out the project you're interested in getting involved with and [join a] special interest group that voices your opinion." The students see this as a Chinese-menu approach to political participation. As a UC-Berkeley man observed: "I think you can join *anything*, from an educational group that puts out brochures to something like [an environmental] group that takes action." And a Florida State man remarked, "In this town, all you have to do is open your phone book and you can find any kind of political interest group that you want."

A Gonzaga University woman also saw interest groups as

an essential part of the political process—though she made a distinction between so-called "business" groups and interest groups that work for citizens who, she believed, are in need of a voice. She explained, "I think [citizens] have a voice through organizations, through lobbyists who are not big business lobbyists." Citing groups that lobby for education she continued, "If [those groups] weren't there to help people, the children who don't have a voice, because they can't vote, would have nothing." She continued, "If you didn't have lobbying groups, someone could just go out and speak their side and no one would oppose it." Other students participating in this study made distinctions similar to those of the Gonzaga University woman. It is not clear, specifically, which groups fall into the different categories that students speak about, although organizations such as environmental and education groups are seen in generally more positive terms while any group associated with corporations seem to be viewed negatively. What is clear, however, is that students believe organized interests drive politics. The way people can make sure that their voice is heard is by "joining interest groups that work on issues you strongly believe in," said a University of Minnesota man. "The only people who are getting heard right now are people who belong to these groups."

There's a lot of special interest groups, and they represent somebody. But the amount of power they have is extremely unfortunate.

– UC-Berkeley man

Despite their influence, many students do not believe that interest groups should have such a large effect on the political process. Indeed, inordinate power by a few is yet another of the messages of pessimism that shape students' views on politics.

Message of Pessimism #4: Only the Financially Powerful Are Represented. The students in this study have serious questions as to how large corporations and other lobbying groups use their wealth to influence political decisions made in this country. "There's a lot of special interest groups, and they represent *somebody*. But the amount of power they have is extremely unfortunate," commented a UC-Berkeley man. A woman in the UC-Berkeley group added, "The corporation donates money for the campaign and then the politician owes the company." A Siena College student remarked, "Senators and congressmen owe too much to people like lobbyists and big companies who will do them a little favor and they're going to owe them

something later on." And a Wake Forest student commented, "People get elected depending on what companies support them and how much money they get."

Students see this practice of politics as antithetical to the idea of representative democracy. Indeed, the perceived relationship between public officials and corporations and other lobbying groups with substantial financial resources has left many students in these discussions with the same impression that an Oklahoma State woman holds about public officials. "They don't represent the people anymore," she said. "They represent the companies who give them money." A Florida State woman remarked, "You have to have money to get to know a politician. They're supported by big businesses and special interest groups." A University of Minnesota man said, "You can vote and all that, but the political system is rigged for special interests and corporations." The students interviewed come to this conclusion because, they say, they feel that the political decisions they see being made today favor those with money. "Big businesses have the money to support the candidates," said a UC-Berkeley man. "And *their* policy is usually what gets passed." And a classmate added, "What it comes down to is: the more money you have, the more voice you have. If people don't have the money, well. . . ." Similarly, a Siena College man commented, "I think money plays too big of a role. If you don't have money, you really don't have a chance." A Morgan State woman and a UC-Berkeley man were more succinct, both coming to the same conclusion. They said in their respective groups: "Money is power," and "Money affects everything in politics."

Students believe that the influence of money in politics has bred a competition of one organized interest pitted against another. An Oklahoma State woman said, "They look at issues that are important to *them*, and then choose a candidate on that *one* thing. They make their choice on one issue." In the world of single-issue interest groups, students indicate they seldom have an opportunity to form a broader view on issues; they cannot find organizations that take a broad approach to politics. A University of Michigan man commented, "If you take the time to be involved in one issue, you don't really have the time to be involved in other issues." But, as a woman in the University of Michigan discussion remarked, choosing one issue is how politics

works today. She said, "Sometimes I think it's all or nothing. You *have* to devote yourself to one cause."

Protesting

Students in our campus conversations say that protests are one of the primary actions people can take in politics, indeed *the* most effective way to have their voice heard. Why? Because protests are what they know. A UC-Berkeley student said, "Protests are what a lot of people do. At least here at Berkeley and in San Francisco. It's probably the same everywhere." A Siena College student cited an example on his campus. "People protested when we went to war," he said, referring to the Persian Gulf War. A University of Michigan man looked to his campus as well in describing protest politics. "Someone on campus is always protesting something," he commented. A University of Michigan woman described protests this way: "The potential [to be heard] is there. It has been shown through the civil rights rallies in the 1960s." Students even look to China when identifying protests as a way to have a political voice. A Siena College woman said in her discussion, "I think that anyone can have a voice. I get the picture from something like the Chinese protest."

The L.A. riots, as bad as they were, were important. People would have dismissed the whole thing if there wouldn't have been riots.

– Florida State man

Many of the students in these discussions see protest politics as *vital* and *necessary* to expressing their political views — other means of participating seem to have so little impact to them. "Civil disobedience is how to get things done. Otherwise people don't pay attention," said a UC-Berkeley man. A classmate added that students protest because, "its not like we're invited to come and talk about and figure out how the budget's going," referring to a recent budget debate on his campus. A Florida State man remarked, "The L.A. riots, as bad as they were, were important. People would have dismissed the whole thing if there wouldn't have been riots. The media, George Bush, and Bill Clinton went down [to L.A.] because of the riots. That whole thing would have been dismissed if it hadn't been for the riots." A Morgan State woman talked about campus politics when citing the need for protests. "The administration really doesn't listen to the students. So that's why students have boycotts and sit-ins and things like that. That's the only thing that gets the administration [to say],

'oh, these kids are serious.'" And a classmate added, "Same as the government." A Wake Forest student observed, "I think people feel like they can get more done through a protest than they can through one vote. You feel like you're more involved in a protest, even though you are one person in a big crowd." Another Wake Forest student added, "[Protests] get people's attention. They are more likely to get people to listen to your opinion." Gaining attention was also mentioned by a University of Michigan man citing an example on the Ann Arbor campus. "There was major media coverage," he said. In the Florida State campus discussion a woman said, "You have to try to get as many people together as possible, because that's what the media cares about. So if enough people scream loud enough somebody's going to listen." A Morgan State man remarked, "Protests are extreme measures to use, but they get the most attention at that point in time. And if no one listens," he continued, "you have to take extreme measures." And a Gonzaga University woman stated flatly, "It works."

Protests are extreme measures to use, but they get the most attention at that point in time. And if no one listens, you have to take extreme measures.

– Morgan State man

But, in the end, many students reject protests as a way to participate in politics; they reject the political conditions that make protests necessary. And with this rejection, the sense of pessimism about politics that envelopes students only hardens.

Message of Pessimism #5: Politics of the Extreme. Students believe that protests are symbolic of a politics that demands that people stake out extreme positions — positions that even protestors may not really believe, but feel compelled to adopt just so *someone* will take notice. Students consistently complained about this. A University of Michigan woman described her experience working with organized interests: "Sometimes you want to join in but the group's position is so strong that you don't want to support everything they're saying. But you can't be part of the group unless you do. She then noted with exasperation, "[You can't participate] even though you care about the issue." A student in the Morgan State discussion made a similar observation when he and his peers were discussing the political discourse that surrounds many issues today. He asserted, "There's no solutions discussed, it's all rhetoric." A University of Michigan man remarked about the protest politics he sees, "It leaves no room for moderation." A classmate added, "People don't realize the middle of the

road is an opinion, too." And a Wake Forest student said, "People are either extreme right or extreme left."

While many of the students we interviewed said that engaging in extreme rhetoric or actions is a primary means of attracting attention, they believe that public officials are so insulated from citizens that the officials do not hear the messages. A Wake Forest student said, "You're heard by the citizens, but I don't think protests have that much effect on the people you want [to influence], like the senators or congressmen." The student elaborated, "Protests might affect everyday people, which will have an impact down the road, *maybe*, but they won't change a public official's mind." A UC-Berkeley man remarked about protests, "Watching stuff happening around here, you go out on the street and you see what a group of people say. A lot of times the reaction to that will be like six months down the road. And it may not even necessarily be from that." A University of Michigan woman had this to say about protests when responding to her classmate's assertion that protests in the sixties were a positive example of bringing about political change, "I think that people tried, but nothing happened." A Siena College student said, "Any protest on Washington really has no bearing. Politicians just do what they want." And a Florida State man described the results of a recent demonstration against university budget cuts at the state capitol building near his campus, "I had some friends who went to the capital to participate in a demonstration and then they were going to go talk to individual legislators. But [the legislators] saw all those students outside demonstrating so they went out to lunch. They wouldn't talk to anybody."

I think our political system is becoming impotent. It's becoming so partisan, the power of special interests, money, it's coming to the point where it seems to be losing its effectiveness.

– University of Michigan man

"Politics Is a Fraud"

These campus discussions suggest that many students have come to one conclusion about politics: It is irrelevant. "I think our political system is becoming impotent," remarked a University of Michigan man. "It's becoming so partisan, the power of special interests, money, it's coming to the point where it seems to be losing its effectiveness." A Siena College student remarked in his discussion group that government and public officials have lost their direction. "I think politicians have lost sight of what they should be doing," the student said. "They're always worrying

about past problems instead of moving forward to do something good for the future. I think we've lost some direction on where we should be going." As a result, many students have lost faith in their public institutions. As a Wake Forest student observed, "People don't think the system can really help them anymore." In the Morgan State discussion a woman remarked, "We can't really change how things are going. We can't change the system." And a Siena College student commented, "People are discouraged because nothing ever comes about. There never really is any change."

Indeed, many students who participated in these discussion groups believe the political process is in a state of disrepair. "It's like that song, 'London Bridge is Falling Down,'" said a Morgan State woman. "It's the same with government. The bridge is falling down and we cannot change how things are going." It seems that many students are resigned that, the politics they see, is how it will always be. As an Oklahoma State woman reflected:

> [Politics] is just going to keep being dirty. It's not all bad, but there's so much that is. It's like a boat that has a hole in it and if they would have stopped and patched the boat up while they had a chance then the boat would have made it to shore. But now the hole is so big that it's impossible to patch.

So now, at a time in their lives when students should be preparing to be the political participants and leaders of tomorrow, many do not even believe in politics. "Politics is just a big fraud to me," remarked a Morgan State woman. Another Morgan State woman added, "It's scandal, deceit, and bribery." A UC-Berkeley woman commented, "It just seems like the government right now isn't made for today." Many students simply do not see how politics affects them; politics is just another event that they observe happening in the outside world. "Politics is something to watch at 6 o'clock," remarked a Wake Forest student. "You see things on CNN. You walk by a *USA Today* news rack and look at the headlines," commented a Siena College student. Another Wake Forest student added, "I don't see how politics, whether there are Republicans or Democrats in office, is going to affect you. It might affect you, but not directly." A

UC-Berkeley man expressed similar sentiments, saying, "Politics is irrelevant from my standpoint. I just don't think it's relevant for people like me." Similar comments were made in the University of Minnesota campus discussion. When students were asked if young Americans are apathetic, a woman retorted, "I think people care about things, but they know that nothing they say will change things." Another woman added, "People care. I mean, *I care*, but [politics] doesn't care about my problems. Politics might work to solve problems for some people, but it doesn't work for me. So, I have to take care of me and mine." A Morgan State woman remarked, "I'm very concerned about my family and my community, but not with politics." So some students now seem to be making a conscious decision to turn their backs on politics altogether. A University of Michigan woman said about politics, "I just think that it is a system I'd never want to be a part of." Another Morgan State student made this stinging rebuke:

> As far as we know, the politics of this country is corrupt and has been corrupt since day one. So why should we contribute to a corrupt system? That's why, for me personally, I don't really care what goes on in American politics.

And a Florida State student provided this analysis: "What we have is a silent protest going on [against politics]. So you have a generation slipping into a dream world. I have friends who are saying, 'screw it.' People are disillusioned, escaping . . . so you have people disappearing into the cracks."

You have a generation slipping into a dream world. I have friends who are saying, "screw it." People are disillusioned, escaping . . . so you have people disappearing into the cracks.

– Florida State student

Students can imagine a different kind of politics from what they see today — a politics based on people coming together to exchange ideas and solve problems. The politics they describe depends on engaging in new political practices.

Chapter II
Reimagining Politics

Students reject the politics that they see being practiced today. Given current political practices, they would just as soon not be involved. But provided the opportunity, students in these campus conversations describe a different politics — one in which they *do* want to be involved. This alternative would require that new political habits be adopted. Students believe that citizens must engage in discussions with other citizens — wherever people might gather; that they must listen to and understand different perspectives for acting on the problems at hand; and that with these new practices, students themselves would begin to gain a sense that participation matters. *This* is how students propose to confront the politics of pessimism.

Seeking Different Political Practices

In the campus discussions, students were asked to identify a specific political issue they had seen or experienced firsthand. Then they were asked to describe in specific terms how they saw politics being practiced on this issue, and to consider how politics might be practiced differently.

Students chose a variety of issues. At Morgan State, the University of Michigan, and the University of Minnesota budget constraints at the state level and the effects on their universities were discussed. At Siena College, Florida State, Gonzaga University, and Wake Forest students focused on different campus issues — alcohol policy, student athletic fees, date rape, and race relations respectively. The

UC-Berkeley conversation centered on health care benefits for university employees. Colorado College students discussed environmental issues. And a statewide education initiative was raised at Oklahoma State. Yet, while the issues chosen by students in each group were quite different, their views on how politics should be practiced are strikingly similar.

At the core of this: students strongly emphasize the need for better communication in politics; they suggest that discussion is essential for making politics work. "I'd like to see more discussions and things to make people aware [of issues]," declared a Wake Forest man. "Discussion is real important in making changes," an Oklahoma State man observed. And a Gonzaga University woman noted that fundamental to politics is, "You have to be able to communicate with people." A Siena College woman said that she is looking for in-depth discussions in the political process. "Something like the Lincoln-Douglass debates," she said. "They would talk for hours and they wouldn't have prearranged questions." As the discussion among she and her classmates continued, it became evident that students did not expect public officials or themselves to participate in daylong debates; instead it is the concept of give-and-take conversations on political issues that they are seeking. As an Oklahoma State man remarked, "We could just talk to each other, those of us here." And a Wake Forest man explained, after saying that he would like to see more debates, "The thing I was talking about is just a bunch of people swapping ideas."

Discussion is real important in making changes.

– Oklahoma State man

Students in these conversations believe that political discussions can happen anywhere. One UC-Berkeley student said that public debate is, in its most basic form, "a conversation in my apartment." A Gonzaga University woman made a similar point: "They could be in dorm rooms. It would be a casual thing." And a classmate added, "We could find a classroom and start our own discussion." A Siena College student described how conversations get started on her campus: "Sometimes there are [posters] on the walls about the environment and about the war. People will walk by and they'll go, 'Oh my God, did you read that?' It starts people talking." And a Gonzaga University man suggested that such small conversations might lead to something larger:

> Maybe if someone discusses [an issue] with one of their friends, who goes on to speak to someone else who might have a little more information ... and that continues on in a chain until it actually does change what's going on.

But few students say that they actually have experienced the kinds of political discussions that they describe in these interviews—or, at least they do not connect such discussions to politics. It is evident from these campus conversations that students believe significant change must be made in the practice of politics. They say several distinctive practices are needed to make politics more engaging, practices that they do not associate with the political process today.

Need to Understand Issues. Students say that they and other citizens must be better informed on political issues if they are to be a part of the political process. "You need to have a clue about what's going on. You need to know about specific issues and also take a look at the big picture," observed a Florida State man. Similar comments were heard in the campus conversations across the country. "We've got to be more informed," said a University of Michigan student. "We need to know more about the issues," declared a Morgan State man when his group talked about capacities required of them to participate in the political process. The students who took part in these interviews do not go easy on themselves. "We *all* need to make more of an effort," remarked a Gonzaga University woman in this regard. Students see being informed essential for maintaining — indeed, elevating — the quality of the public debate. As a Wake Forest student commented: "When everyone is knowledgeable about something it's much easier to have a debate." These students also believe that becoming personally informed on issues will enable citizens to have a greater sense that participation matters. "If [students] find information on an issue," noted a UC-Berkeley man in explaining the value he sees in becoming informed on issues, "they will see how they can make a difference."

You need to have a clue about what's going on. You need to know about specific issues and also take a look at the big picture.

– Florida State man

But many students say that they find it difficult to learn about political issues; they do not know how to sort through the political debate. "You're *expected* to know how to get information and ideas," complained a UC-Berkeley man.

And an Oklahoma State woman summed up the frustration that many of her peers have in learning about issues, when she remarked with exasperation, "We just don't know how to do it." A woman from the University of Michigan explained, "I feel like it's very difficult to be educated about the issues, because the only kind of information that we get are campaign ads on television." One of her classmates added, "On most issues people see [the debate] as two ships passing in the night. In magazines where two people write an article about the same topic, oftentimes their arguments don't even address the same points. If you don't know something about the issues, how are you supposed to figure out what's going on?" And a Wake Forest student noted that the result of this confusion might make some people fearful of becoming involved in the political process: "Sometimes people feel like they know they can do things, but they're [afraid] that they might make a fool of themselves . . . because they don't feel knowledgeable about the issues."

On most issues people see [the debate] as two ships passing in the night.

– University of Michigan man

Students in this study say that it is difficult to understand issues, in part, because they are presented too simplistically, too often in sharp terms of "black or white." "People need to realize that there can be grey areas in certain things," remarked a Wake Forest student echoing the comments of the University of Michigan woman quoted earlier as saying, "People don't realize the middle of the road is an opinion, too." An Oklahoma State student gave an example of a debate being cast in overly simplistic terms when he described the controversy that surrounded a recent education initiative in his home state: "The way [the initiative] was worded — because of the way the choices were talked about . . . it was kind of a bad deal," he continued, "we only had two choices, 'yes' or 'no.' If there would have been three or four choices like we were talking earlier. . . ." A classmate finished the thought saying, "If we could have had more choices, maybe we could have voted."

Need to See Different Perspectives. Students say that it is important to understand the full range of perspectives on issues if political discussions are to be productive. "I would like to see greater diversity on the speakers we have and in points of view. I want to hear different perspectives," remarked a Colorado College man. A University of Michigan man commented, "Once you see both ends of the

spectrum on just one issue, you realize more that all issues have two ends of the spectrum." A Florida State woman said, "If there was more discussion about the issues, about different views, that would help" [make politics work better]. In the Wake Forest discussion a student said, "Rather than sitting around and hearing one person say something, it's kind of nice to hear both sides, it gives you the whole story." Another Wake Forest student added, "If I feel strongly about something because something's happened to me, I have a valid position to state about it. But I don't think it's right for me to only base my opinion on that one thing." A Siena College student made a similar remark, commenting, "It's important to try and understand other people. And that's hard because it's easy to get blinded by your own opinion." A Gonzaga University man explained the need to understand the views of others in this way: "We need to be able to look at [an issue] from other people's perspective. If I look at it only from a very personal perspective, I don't know everything that is happening." A Siena College student said, "[You need] people from different groups to talk — to give points of view — so you have a good sight of the whole issue." A classmate emphasized that if students — as well as other citizens and public officials — work harder at thinking about perspectives other than their own, then perhaps it will be easier to have discussions *and* move forward in confronting the important issues of the day. He said:

> After thinking about it, I realize how narrow-minded maybe I've been. If we were to be a little more open-minded, and not so defensive, but actually listen and think about what other people say, maybe more would get done.

We need to be able to look at [an issue] from other people's perspective. If I look at it only from a very personal perspective, I don't know everything that is happening.

– Gonzaga University man

And a Florida State man said that hearing different perspectives enables people to see that they have things in common. He commented, "When you learn about different cultures, you begin to realize that their needs are your needs. When you work together, you see that everything is basically the same."

If the political process is to include citizens with many different perspectives, students say it is also necessary to find a common language to talk about the issues being confronted. A UC-Berkeley man reflected on a campus

forum he attended, where participants were clearly talking past one another: "They couldn't even understand what others were saying." In the University of Michigan discussion group a student explained his views on this point, first, by saying simply, "[We need] a common language." He continued by indicating that having a common language is especially important when the group includes people who hold different opinions. "If you use one word to describe something, and someone else uses another, then it's hard to agree on anything. So, if you use similar words it would help." And a Colorado College man said that to participate in politics, "You need to be able to understand the language and what things mean."

Need to Make Decisions with Others. A University of Michigan man captured the views of many of his fellow students when he said, "The inability of people to compromise or to discuss things is a real problem." Fundamental to making decisions with others, students in these campus conversations say, is the ability of people to work together toward a common goal. "There needs to be more give and take, right now everybody just wants to take," remarked a Morgan State man. "People need to be willing to change their mind—not be so hard core," commented a University of Michigan student. A Wake Forest student, who stressed the need for people to be open-minded and compromise more, remarked, "It's really hard to talk to someone when they're so close-minded. Sometimes they're totally shutting you out and you [feel like] you're just talking to a blank wall."

There needs to be more give and take, right now everybody just wants to take.

– Morgan State man

Often, the students interviewed say, it is difficult to make decisions with others because issues seem so personal. As one Wake Forest student described, "I think sometimes when you go into a debate, and you get caught up in the moment, you just lose it. The issue deals with you personally, and a lot of times there are no concessions that you feel like you can make. It might get out of hand because some people want you to do this, and you want them to do that, and there are no concessions." But a classmate responded, "We need to learn certain values to be open-minded. I mean the first time someone doesn't agree with you, the last thing on your mind is looking at their point of view." And a Siena College man remarked, "We need to be working toward what looks good for everybody, for society as a whole, not just go for

your own selfish goals, but trying to reach things together." A University of Michigan student made this point, too. "Everyone needs to learn to compromise their ideas," he said. A Florida State woman remarked, "I think there needs to be more unity, and working together. That's what life is about." And a woman in the University of Minnesota group talked about compromise after noting that she thinks people involved in politics are too concerned about their own narrow interests: "Look around this table at all the different opinions. To get along you have to make allowances" for what other people believe.

If things were really opened up and people could talk things through, people would probably change their minds on some things. Then we could do more.

– UC-Berkeley man

An important part of learning to compromise, students say, is dealing with trade-offs. As an Oklahoma State woman explained when talking about the education reform initiative in her state: "We need to talk about whether or not people are willing to pay more taxes or should we get money from other funds, cut back on other funds. And where we think the reform is needed — in elementary schools or at a higher level, in large cities or in small towns." A Florida State man raised the idea that trade-offs need to be considered saying, "We need to hear more choices of platforms of ideas, because we're not all the same kind of people. More [ideas] would represent more groups of people and then there could be trade-offs and compromises. That's the way it's gotta be."

The students in these conversations believe that learning to make decisions with others will enable progress to be made on important issues facing the country. As a UC-Berkeley man remarked, "If things were really opened up and people could talk things through, people would probably change their minds on some things. Then we could do more." A Siena College man observed, "We need to realize that we're not always going to get our way totally. But maybe if you compromise a little bit you'll get some of what you want. If you take the attitude, 'I want it all my way,' chances are people are going to laugh in your face and say no. But if you say, 'I'll do this if you do a little bit of this,' people will meet you in the middle." And an Oklahoma State woman summed up the views held by many students when she commented:

> Even though everyone doesn't feel *exactly* the same way, a lot of people still have a lot of the

same views. You can see how someone else's view can fit with what you're saying. Then we could get more agreement to do things.

Need to Emphasize Listening. Central to changing how politics is practiced is the need for better listening, students argue. "I know this might sound stupid," began a Wake Forest woman. "But when people take a side and they get ticked off, they don't say what's on their mind. They just, they yell it, or something like that, and if you yell something, no one listens to you." A University of Michigan student made a similar point in this way: "People need to listen. It's like our ground rules here," referring to the campus discussion. "One person needs to talk at a time rather than [have] shouting matches." Another student in the group agreed, saying, "People need to just listen to what other people have to say rather than shout at each other." A Colorado College woman remarked that if you have something to say, "You need to know that someone else will listen to you." A Siena College student said about listening to people: "If you see yourself becoming too close-minded, you've got to stop yourself and force yourself to listen to [other people's] opinions. I mean, you may think their opinion is terrible, but instead of shutting them out make yourself listen — for yourself. You don't have to agree, but just listen." And a University of Michigan woman remarked, "People need to think about what other people are saying." She explained that too often participants in public forums and other political discussions do not take the time to listen to what is being said. "[People] take the first word that you say and then start screaming and never hear the last [words you say]," she added.

Making sure that everyone has the chance to be heard also promotes better listening, students say. "It's important that someone doesn't dominate it," remarked a Wake Forest student about discussions. He went on to explain that if one person, or a group of people, dominates a debate other participants might find it difficult to sort through the issue. "If you see someone talking a lot, you might think that they're more knowledgeable — therefore, their opinion is more correct." A classmate added that it is important to have discussions "where the ideas get expressed, but not overexpressed," so that everyone can be heard. "Everyone should have a chance to have a say," said a Siena College

If you see yourself becoming too close-minded, you've got to stop yourself and force yourself to listen to [other people's] opinions. I mean, you may think their opinion is terrible, but instead of shutting them out make yourself listen — for yourself.

– Siena College student

student. And a Morgan State man commented that if some participants are allowed to control the meeting, then the opinions of others will be lost. "You'll say one thing and it will get lost in the shuffle," he concluded. If listening is emphasized, the students with whom we talked believe that it is much more likely that people will seize the opportunity to participate in political discussions. They will be less intimidated by the vocal and find it easier to learn about issues.

Need for a Sense that Participation Matters. Beyond practicing politics differently, students in this study suggest that they need to have a sense that, if they do participate in the political process, their efforts will be worthwhile. A Siena College student expressed skepticism about participating by drawing an analogy to a situation in which students on his campus were invited to comment on a policy concerning telephones in campus housing: "I don't really think they ever wanted to listen to the students. I think the administration already made up their minds," he asserted. A classmate added, "The student body can't do anything if the administration is going to ignore them." A University of Minnesota woman expressed similar frustration about whether participating can produce any effect. Referring to a recent campus issue on how to pay for football stadium improvements, she said, "We had a vote on whether or not to raise athletic fees. We had the highest turnout ever, 85 percent voted no, and they still increased [the fees]. They'd already decided it." A classmate added, "If we have no control over our own campus, how can we do anything in politics?" And a University of Michigan man questioned whether participation matters reflecting on his work in student government, said, "Some of the things that everyone wants, you can't get done. Not even in the whole time you're on campus. There is so much inertia and so much bureaucracy that you really can't get anything done. The frustration really builds up. It's the same thing with politics."

Having a greater sense that their participation matters would lead many students to be more involved, they say. "If [young people] have a sense that what they were doing was worthwhile, then I think we would be more involved," remarked a University of Michigan student. "I think a lot of people would like to be involved, but they kind of get

brushed-off," suggested an Oklahoma State woman. Students at Siena College and UC-Berkeley described this sentiment from a personal standpoint: "I do a few things [in politics] and people say to me, 'why do you do that, it doesn't get anything done,'" said the Siena student. The woman at UC-Berkeley commented, "I don't participate because it doesn't really do anything." Asked if she would be politically active if her efforts did make a difference she said, "I would, definitely."

The students with whom we talked are not saying that they will only participate if they "get their own way." They are looking for something less ambitious than that. A Morgan State student put it this way, "Students do not believe their voice is being heard. If we knew that we were being heard, we'd make more of an effort to do things." And a UC-Berkeley student characterized the view that emerged in campus discussions across the country as a desire simply to be part of the process:

> We need to know that our ideas are going to be taken seriously. I don't mean we need to be making decisions, but just be involved in discussions.

There's definitely a discrepancy between what we want and what is happening.

– Siena College student

Looking Past the Politics of Pessimism

A Siena College student sat back and reflected on the campus conversation held on the Loudonville, New York, campus: "People all seem to have a negative view of politics," he said. "Yet everything we've come up with are positive things. They build on good qualities that people have." After a slight pause he added, "There's definitely a discrepancy between what we want and what is happening." The observation made by the Siena student could have easily applied to each of the campus discussions; the students who participated in this study are looking for a different kind of politics.

Students in these campus conversations see a much greater role for citizens in practicing politics, it is clear that they are not calling for so-called "mass participation," or quick fixes. "You can't have three million people in the same room," remarked an Oklahoma State man as he and his classmates exchanged ideas. The expectations of these

students seem to be realistic. They know what they seek will take work on their part. "At some point, we're going to just have to do it," remarked a Florida State man. "We have to make the effort," commented a Siena College student. "If you don't put the work into it, you're not going to get anything out of it." And, they say, change will take time. Another Siena College student used the idea of having forums — an idea raised by a student earlier in the campus discussion — as an example of the need to approach politics differently: "You can't have just one civic forum and expect everything to change. You've got to have forums for a couple of weeks in a row. Those who [attend] will tell their friends. Then you have to do it again."

As one listens to students on college campuses across America, it becomes evident that students are simply looking for a political process that will include citizens in the debate. As a Wake Forest student said, "We just need an opportunity."

Students do not believe that the political education they receive today — in and out of the classroom — prepares them to practice anything but politics as usual; this is a politics they see as irrelevant. A broader approach to political education is needed.

Chapter III
Educating Students for Politics

Students argue that they need a different kind of political education — one that will help them develop the personal capacities to engage differently in the political process. Yet by the time students find themselves at college, they believe that their chance for a political education has passed. And when college students are asked to consider a range of options now being debated for how they might learn politics at the university, those interviewed for this study view these proposals as too narrow in scope, addressing only the symptoms of the disconnection they feel from politics. Students argue that political education must cut beneath these symptoms — enabling them to build the basic skills necessary for engaging in politics.

The Role of Colleges and Universities

Where do students say they learn politics? By observing and listening to their elders, watching television, and looking at political activity and discussion taking place around them. "You learn from your parents — at home," commented a UC-Berkeley man. A classmate added, "at work, too." In the Morgan State discussion a student responded, "church." And a classmate said, "You learn about politics through a lifetime of learning." A University of Michigan student responded, "You learn from your parents and your peers." A Wake Forest student made a similar comment, "You are taught through observing your parents, grandparents, and people around you in your environment." And a Gonzaga University man described the broadest possible

learning ground, "You learn politics from society in general. It's part of our culture." Students in group after group described that they learn politics long before they reach college. "I think that you start learning [political] skills in kindergarten and first grade," remarked a Gonzaga University woman. A woman in the University of Michigan discussion commented, "I think some of these things you learn in high school. College is too late." A Morgan State student said, "I think when you get here you've already learned these things. You learn them growing up." And a University of Minnesota woman who had been quiet throughout the campus discussion remarked, "I think you need to learn to participate in politics when you're a little kid. By the time you're in junior high and high school, you're pretty set in your ways."

I think you need to learn to participate in politics when you're a little kid. By the time you're in junior high and high school, you're pretty set in your ways.

– University of Minnesota woman

For now, when students do talk about receiving a political education on campus, they think about it in very particular terms. A Siena College student interpreted questions about political education in college in this way: "That'd be a school for politicians. If you wanted to be a politician you'd go to that school." A UC-Berkeley man said that many students cannot afford to study "politics" because political studies offer limited job prospects. "There aren't a lot of people who have the luxury to go into policy study. It's a privilege to start thinking about that." A Morgan State student responded that when instructors teach politics now, they are "just reflecting what's going on outside with politics." This is unappealing to many students. Other students feel that a political education on campus is only for political science majors. A Siena College man stated flatly, "Politics excludes all other majors." A UC-Berkeley man suggested that students actually shy away from political education at college. He remarked to his group, "Classes on politics frighten people off." Faced with the alternative of learning politics as it is practiced today, or nothing at all, many students seem to choose the latter.

In the campus discussions, students were pushed to consider what role their institutions could play in helping them develop capacities to practice the different kind of politics they had begun to describe. Slowly, the students began to see a role for universities in teaching a different approach to politics. "They could help us become more educated on the political system and what we can do," remarked an

Oklahoma State woman. A University of Michigan student explained that students are developing skills to practice politics, whether for good or ill, in college classrooms and on college campuses because everything a person sees and experiences influences these skills. "You have to learn these skills," he remarked. He continued by saying, "*They* should teach us political skills, absolutely." But students began to talk about colleges playing a role in their political education only after they discovered that what they are learning now leaves them unprepared to practice politics. "My senior year in high school we had a class in American government," said a Florida State woman. "All they taught us was the *history* of American government. What they need to do is teach us how to be involved." A UC-Berkeley man commented, "We don't really talk about [politics]. We take U.S. history and all that, but we don't really learn about politics. We don't learn that we can make a difference." Another Florida State woman expressed frustration at not knowing how to participate. "When I was a freshman, I got my first taste of politics," she said, describing a time when budget cuts for the university were being considered by the state legislature. "The governor said [to students], 'if you don't like what's happening, get off your duffs and do something.'" In exasperation, she concluded, "We would do [something], but we don't know how." And a University of Michigan woman, responding to a similar comment made in her discussion, observed, "I think this feeling is really common among our age group. We don't see what it is that we can do." This sense of the inadequacy of political education led a Gonzaga University woman to reach this conclusion:

> I have a feeling that from all the education I've had, the one thing that I've learned is, to be quite honest, I can't change anything.

As students discussed the university's role, many of them in these campus discussions began to see political education as a responsibility of colleges and universities. A Gonzaga University woman remarked in her discussion, "Many people haven't experienced" participating in politics. She continued, "It should be their responsibility to teach us these things. We need it to take into our lives after college." A Siena College student also noted that colleges and universities have a responsibility in this area. He stated:

I think this feeling is really common among our age group. We don't see what it is that we can do.

– University of Michigan woman

> The college should challenge us directly. They should help us sharpen our skills to be good citizens as well as productive members of society. I mean what good are you if you're just an engineer and you do your job and you go home? Big Deal.

A UC-Berkeley man called for colleges and universities to play a role in students' political education in this way: "A lot of people think that by 18 you should know how to participate and vote. But that's not true." Another UC-Berkeley man added that students need the university's help because, as his classmate noted, they just don't know how to participate. "I think it's real important [to realize] that there's a difference between interest and action." He commented further:

> Personally I feel like I'm very interested. I talk about [issues] with friends, but I don't act in any way. I never protest, I hardly ever vote, I never do *anything*. I don't really know how to act. I don't really know how to express all the things I feel. I think a lot of people who *are* interested just kind of give up.

Prospects for Political Education on Campus

There is now a debate on many college and university campuses around the country over just how higher education institutions can best cultivate political skills that will enable —or motivate — college students to become more active members of the political process. Of course there are many different approaches for political education being discussed, but changes in curriculum, teaching methods, and student experiences are at the core of this debate. In these campus discussions, students were asked to consider four general choices: instituting community service programs; emphasizing liberal arts education (with and without a required set of readings as a component); creating opportunities for political discussions as a part of campus life both in and out of the classroom; and democratizing the college campus.

One striking feature about this part of the discussion with students deserves special note: students had to be continu-

ally reminded that they were to consider the various initiatives in terms of *political education*. They were more likely to talk about the pros and cons of the choices on their face value; for example, some students questioned the merits behind a required set of readings simply because, they said, many of the books that might be on that list they would likely have already read before reaching college.

Importantly, when students were pushed to make the connection between the various approaches, and political education, they found merit in each of these choices; but students indicated that none of the approaches, by themselves, are broad enough to provide them with the skills to practice politics differently.

I think community service is important, but I don't see it as politics.

– University of Michigan woman

Community Service. "Community service would help a lot of people realize more of what's going on out there," remarked a Wake Forest woman. "If they had to go get involved, I think it might change some people, make them more open-minded." Gaining a broader view of the world and becoming more open-minded are the benefits of doing community service that students typically name. A Gonzaga woman commented, "Community service gives people experiences that they haven't had before. It gives them a better understanding of other people." And a Siena College student had this to say: "Community service makes you more open-minded and more willing to listen because you're helping people with different problems than your own. So it's only bound to benefit you in politics because you're able to listen better to other people's sides."

But, while the students interviewed generally see merit in community service, they are equally cautious as to what might result if it is made a mandatory part of political education. "I think working in the community is wonderful, but if people are told to do it then a lot of the time you're more likely to not want to do it," remarked a Wake Forest student. Indeed, this student went on to say, "I think part of learning is through self-discovery on your own part — not when someone else tries to make you learn something." Still other students have difficulty seeing how community service even fits with politics at all. As a University of Minnesota woman noted, "I don't really see a connection between community service and politics." A University of Michigan woman made a similar comment, "I think com-

munity service is important, but I don't see it as politics." And a woman from UC-Berkeley indicated that students might look to community service as a way to feel better as a person and not in terms of a political education: "I think in some ways we would do it to please ourselves."

Liberal Education. Students in these interviews vigorously defend the notion of a liberal education, and say that it must be composed of a broad range of subjects and ideas. "A college education should be a liberal, well-rounded education. That kind of education will prepare you for a career and sharpen your skills to be a good citizen and a productive member of society," declared a Siena College man. Indeed, students believe that a liberal education helps them learn to weigh one issue against another when it comes to politics. "I see how a lot of things go together since I've been at college," a UC-Berkeley woman related to her group. "I came here to study education. Now I think more about how economics affects education and an entire range of issues." And a Morgan State man feels that a liberal education lets a person "see how things in the past fit with what's going on in the world now."

As part of a liberal education, some students believe that colleges should require students to read a common set of works, thus providing one source of a common foundation of knowledge from which to discuss and act on political issues. "Using a common set of books would really help communications because you could make references to things and everyone would know what you're talking about. Like a common language," noted a University of Michigan man. A Siena College student had this to say: "There should be a core to an extent . . . so you could have some common knowledge. I think a core would let you interact with other people and not just the people who are in your major." And a Florida State man described the merits he sees in classes focusing on multicultural themes that are required on his campus: "We have a multicultural component in the curriculum. That teaches us that all the different cultures are equally important in making up this country. That teaches us respect and it will put an end to a lot of problems." He concluded with confidence, "It will end things like the L.A. riots."

Students in this study make it clear, though, that they see

liberal education as only a part of political education. "There's a lot more to [politics] than what you learn in your classes and the classroom," remarked a University of Michigan man. "We need to do things like discuss political issues with each other." A Gonzaga University man discussed the limitations of a liberal education in this way: "It's not enough to learn all the information. You need to be able to express the information. You can learn engineering, you can learn political science, you can learn English, but you have got to be able to learn how to express it, too." And many students also see limits to establishing a required set of readings; they question whether there is enough of a connection between reading requirements and politics. "I think it's great to read books," remarked a University of Michigan woman. "But I think what you wind up with is a bunch of people like me and my friends who have read a lot of books: we all have great vocabularies, but we haven't necessarily learned anything about politics."

We need to do things like discuss political issues with each other.

– University of Michigan man

Political Discussions on Campus. "I wish I had someplace to go and talk about what I've learned since I've been here," remarked a Gonzaga University student when her group was asked about political discussions as part of political education. The students interviewed were asked about discussion in classes, formally organized campuswide discussions that are not related to any particular class, and more ad hoc discussions. In all cases, students see discussion as a valuable way to develop a broader view of the world when approaching politics. A Morgan State man remarked, "I would like to talk about political issues in classes. That would be good because it lets us see how the world works on all kinds of issues." And a UC-Berkeley woman made a similar point commenting, "No matter what job you have, whether its an engineer for some big company or whatever, you need to understand that you are doing something that might have consequences that you don't even see." Indeed, students generally concur with the Siena College student who said that learning political skills through discussion is critical. He concluded, "I think that open discussions are very, very important."

Some students indicated that they have participated in campuswide political forums; but, when they discuss their experiences, they quickly return to the problems they associate with politics today. "People would still have to

listen," asserted an Oklahoma State woman. A Wake Forest student observed about her classroom experience, "People are very opinionated in my classes. There's no moderation at all, and it gets totally out of hand." And a Gonzaga University man expressed concern that not all students would be able to participate in discussions. He remarked, "When we've tried to have discussions in ethics class or philosophy class, the smartest students usually dominate — those guys are just machines. You can have a rap session about it before class, but in class the smartest people [do all the talking]."

Student government plays a big role in deciding the curriculum here. It's free and open and anyone can be a part of it. So that's a good example of how we can learn to be a part of politics.

– Florida State man

"Democratizing" the University. Finally, another initiative being considered is to provide students with a direct role in making decisions that affect the campus — a role that goes beyond being involved in discussions, but actually provides a "vote." Students in these discussions were immediately skeptical about this possibility: it was common to hear students make remarks like this one by a UC-Berkeley woman, "I think that's a great idea — the university becoming more democratic — but I don't think it's likely."

Still, when pushed, students did identify many ways in which "democratizing" the university would add value to their political education. "You could see [decision makers] getting student input on decisions and weighing it . . . and not saying, 'that was very nice,' and pat you on the head," remarked a Gonzaga University student. A Florida State man said that students at his school do have a voice on some issues and sees it as an important way to learn politics. "Student government plays a big role in deciding the curriculum here. It's free and open and anyone can be a part of it. So that's a good example of how we can learn to be a part of politics." A Morgan State man said that giving students a decision-making role on campus would enable them to see new possibilities in politics, especially in relation to the administration: "It would help us see politics differently because right now they're just the same as government." And an Oklahoma State man sees this possibility as a way to gain a better sense for what students themselves need to do in politics. "We'd know what our responsibilities are when we get involved," he concluded.

But, in the end, students in our campus discussions question how much each of them would actually benefit; they feel

that opportunities to be a part of decisions would be limited to a few students. "I don't know how many of us would actually get to participate," said a Gonzaga University man. And they believe that a more open campus is so alien to the way things are actually done now that it is unlikely to be a real possibility. A Morgan State woman, referring to the administration, asked, "How can they teach us something that they don't want to? Let's be realistic. They don't want us making decisions." A classmate added, "That's the way it is with politics, too." And a Gonzaga University student wondered whether the university would actually grant students a greater voice in decisions. He explained that even if new approaches were tried, "the university would take on its father, parental figure: let the wise old people make the decisions and the students just go to school. They are going to do things the way they have been doing them for a lot of years. After a while, we would see that that's the way things are."

Need for a Broader Approach

"I don't see how you can pick just one of these choices. We should be doing a conglomeration of these things," declared a Wake Forest student. Most of the students participating in this study came to a similar conclusion. Students expressed concern over whether they would indeed receive the kind of political education they believe is necessary if only one or another of the choices they discussed is pursued. "How do you know what you'll get?" asked a Siena College man expressing his concerns. In answer to his own question he added, "I don't know." A student at the University of Michigan wondered if he and others would gain a clear sense of connection between what they are learning and politics. He remarked, "There's just too much randomness with these choices in whether you're going to learn skills for [politics] or not."

I don't see how you can pick just one of these choices. We should be doing a conglomeration of these things.

– Wake Forest student

Students are looking for a combination of experiences — both in and out of the classroom. "They should teach us using all of these things," remarked a Gonzaga University woman in reference to the various initiatives she and her classmates were asked to consider. A classmate added in reference to learning about politics, "We should think about it in biology, and when we study the classics, and we

should learn to express our views." And a Wake Forest student asked when discussing the choices, "Does it have to be one of these things or another? I mean, think about how stimulating it would be to work out in the community and come back and be able to participate in a forum." Indeed, the students in these interviews believe that integrating politics into their course work, as well as having practical experiences, will enable them to develop the range of personal capacities they need to participate in politics.

Students in these discussions have not connected the education they are receiving and the capacities they are developing to the world of politics.

Surely some might argue that students *are* already learning the skills necessary to practice politics; and that they *are* already receiving an education that combines the various approaches they were asked to consider. Perhaps this is true. But the students in these discussions have not connected the education they are receiving and the capacities they are developing to the world of politics. A University of Michigan woman made this point: "We *may* already know how to do these things. But we don't really know how to use them."

The current debate about how to provide students with a political education is too narrow, according to students in these campus discussions. The "solutions" often championed only address symptoms of what is a larger problem — the disconnection of politics from students' own lives. The approaches, as currently discussed, seem to be characterized in terms of altruism, critical thinking, and diversity, among other ways. While such characteristics are important, students do not see them as paving a road to practicing politics differently. Indeed, when students engage in a debate with predetermined options, they reject the alternatives that are often discussed and turn to talk about broader values and skills. Students are seeking a political education that emphasizes a foundation of personal capacities.

We must meet the challenge raised by the "politics of pessimism" by enabling students to find a context for thinking about politics, developing their political skills, and making changes in the examples we set.

Chapter IV
Meeting the Challenge

Americans are raised to be inherently optimistic. But the college students who participated in this study view politics primarily in negative and pessimistic terms. Indeed, if students are told, "politics is important," but much of what they see suggests to them, "who cares," then they will likely believe that no one does care. As a Siena College student observed, "You can't learn something one way and then live it another. You have to practice what you preach." What students who participated in these conversations see being practiced, and what they have come to believe — whether it is true or not — is that citizens, and they themselves, no longer care about "politics."

Some might argue that the sense of alienation college students feel toward politics is not of great concern: We often hear that college is, after all, the time of life to learn, make lifelong friends, and enjoy the days of youth; it is not a time to delve into the problems of society. Yet even if one accepts this argument, there are profound reasons to be concerned about the alienation that students express toward politics. The students participating in this study hold a narrow view of politics, citizenship, and the potential for both. Americans expressed in *Citizens and Politics* a feeling of being "pushed out" of politics. The disconnection that students — younger Americans — describe is fundamentally different. *While citizens are frustrated, students feel resigned.* As a Gonzaga University woman commented, "Actually politics is a real deflation to someone who all through high school had the ideal of what government is. Then you get involved in it and it's like, oh. . . ." *While*

citizens have a clear sense that things should be different, students do not. Students believe that politics is what it is, that it always has been this way, and that it will always be something that has little relevance to their lives. The understanding many students have of politics led a University of Michigan woman, as quoted earlier, to declare, "I just think that it is a system I'd never want to be a part of." This is a sentiment held by many of her peers.

Being a citizen is your God-given right. Politics doesn't have anything to do with being a citizen.

– Wake Forest man

A Narrow View of Citizenship

Underlying college students' view of politics may be something even deeper than what they see, hear, and experience when it comes to the political process. Their sense that participating in politics is unimportant may have to do partly with their notion of citizenship. A Wake Forest man makes this point clearly:

> Being a citizen is your God-given right. Politics doesn't have anything to do with being a citizen.

Students on each campus were asked to describe citizenship at the beginning of their group discussions. They clearly view it in terms of individual rights. "To be able to voice your own opinion on whatever you think about anything," said a Gonzaga man after a chorus of classmates shouted out, "Freedom!" A Morgan State woman named a litany of individual rights that were heard in discussions across the country. "Freedom of speech, religious choice, right to a fair trial," she said. One of her classmates talked about the freedom of mobility as did an Oklahoma State woman who said of citizenship, "It [means] you can go where you want to go. You don't have to report to anybody."

The rights of individuals that students name in these discussions are the benefits of freedom that make this country the envy of nations around the world. These students clearly see such rights as their entitlement as Americans. Seldom, however, do they name responsibilities along with rights as being a part of citizenship. This is yet another way that students participating in this study diverge from the citizens who were heard in the *Citizens and Politics* report. *While citizens have a strong sense of civic duty, students see primarily entitlement.*

One University of Michigan student did give what seemed

to be a broader explanation of citizenship: "A citizen is a participant in a society who is bound by the obligations of that society and also is able to enjoy the benefits of that society." When he and others made similar comments about citizenship they were pushed to describe what is meant by obligations. Their response was often, "Paying taxes." A Siena College student said, "Obeying the law." And a UC-Berkeley man remarked, "You can be drafted." In the University of Minnesota discussion when asked about the responsibilities of citizens, there was a long pause and then a man finally said, "Obeying the laws." Such responses were common.

Initially, at least, individual rights and obligations, imposed by law, seem to be the extent of how students in these conversations talk about citizenship. Rare are comments like the one made by a Gonzaga University woman: "We're all citizens together so we have to work together." Such comments were rare in the campus discussions.

But after proceeding through a discussion on politics, students were asked again to define citizenship. While students continued to talk in terms of rights and obligations, they expanded their view of citizenship to include responsibilities that go beyond just "obeying the law." Students began to draw connections between citizenship and politics. "In our society there's more to [citizenship] than just following the laws," said a woman at the conclusion of the discussion on the Ann Arbor, Michigan, campus. "I think there's a difference between a citizen and a 'good' citizen. [A good citizen] is involved in the democracy. Not just cast your ballot and that's it. It's more than that." A Siena student put it this way: "I realize we need to be working together toward things." And a Colorado College student reflected at the end of that campus discussion, "You could blame government and say they are not doing anything. But it could be that the government is in the position that it is because people are not accepting responsibility for the community, and the community [itself] is not accepting responsibility."

You could blame government and say they are not doing anything. But it could be that the government is in the position that it is because people are not accepting responsibility for the community.

– Colorado College student

While through the course of discussion students began to make a connection between citizenship and politics, their movement seemed tenuous; it seems that one cynic might easily push them back to their initial views. A comment

made by a University of Michigan man captures the genuine frustration that so many students appear to feel about politics and suggests the challenge that students face in seeing any real opportunities to be part of the political process:

> Sitting here tonight I thought maybe I should be doing something. But on the other hand, I still feel frustration. I don't get anything out of it. The community doesn't get anything out of it. I mean, if nobody gets anything out of it, then how is that making it any better?

The opportunity exists to move the next generation beyond the pessimism that shapes their view of politics.

Changing the Future

The conversations in this study suggest that many students will not participate in the political process given their present understanding of, and attitudes toward, politics. Their view of what they might do in politics is limited to voting, joining interest groups, or protesting — actions they typically reject as holding any meaning. They view politics as a competition that demands players to adopt extreme views and have strong financial backing to have any chance of "winning." A greater understanding of how *this game* is played will not encourage students to become engaged; rather, students say that the more they see of politics today, the less they want to be involved. As a Gonzaga University woman remarked, after describing a number of political experiences, "The one thing I learned was that, to be quite honest, I can't change anything."

These campus conversations make it clear that many students may not be connected to politics. There is real reason to be concerned for the future. But there is hope for change. The opportunity exists to move the next generation beyond the pessimism that shapes their view of politics.

This cannot be done merely by establishing national standards for general knowledge about such things as the Constitution. Neither can this be done simply by requiring community service — however useful that might be. If these campus discussions are representative of all student views on politics, then students need a different context for thinking about politics if they are to engage in the political process. This study suggests a number of ways for students

to discover a different understanding of what politics is, and can be. The possibilities are described below. Together, they challenge all Americans to play a role in the political education of the next generation. And while this study has focused on college students, efforts to provide a different kind of political education must begin well before young people reach the college-age years. Students develop their view of politics and their political skills at home, in their communities, in their primary and secondary schools, and, in the words of a Gonzaga University man quoted earlier, "from society in general."

The challenge will not be easy. The college students participating in this study seem so alienated from politics that without a different context for thinking about politics, the best efforts to teach them may fall on deaf ears. In thinking about ways to teach politics, developing political skills in students is critical — but skills alone are insufficient. Students also need opportunities to put those political skills to use. The following agenda for change combines the teaching of political skills, the practice of politics, and ways for students to hear about and experience politics in a different light. They are not a panacea, but starting points for changing the politics of pessimism.

If we are to make politics relevant to the lives of students and enable them to engage in the political process, a broader approach to political education must also be discovered.

AGENDA ITEM #1

Teach politics differently and enable students to practice this politics.

Everyone would agree that a central part of students' political education should be about our Constitution, the makeup and workings of our institutions, the role of pluralism, among other tenets of American politics. But if we are to make politics relevant to the lives of students and enable them to engage in the political process, a broader approach to political education must also be discovered. Students must develop political skills beyond, for instance, a working knowledge of institutions. They need to learn, as students themselves say in these campus conversations, how to understand issues; how to hold political discussions; and how to make decisions with others — skills that made the birth of America possible.

Still, teaching about political skills without providing opportunities for putting them to use will lead to ever-greater

frustration among students — indeed students are likely to view this as merely "lip service" to their concerns. These observations suggest that providing students with opportunities to practice politics differently is essential; such opportunities might include students engaging in campus forums on important issues, becoming involved in community service, and exploring the political dimension of issues in the classroom. Of course, these approaches are already being tried on many campuses across the country; but students participating in this study say that, if these activities are to help them develop skills to use in politics, *they must see how these activities fit with politics.* Making clear connections is critical. For example, forums on important issues must not break down into factious shouting matches — something that students associate with politics as usual. Students need the opportunity to engage in discussions that explore the complexity of issues, give rise to many perspectives, emphasize listening, and encourage participants to talk things through.

With community service, making a connection to politics means doing more than sending students out into the community to do good deeds. The students participating in this study say that through community service they are exposed to people who have had very different experiences than their own; they begin to see the world through a new lens. But many do not see the connection to politics. If community service is to be a link for engaging students in the political process, they need the chance to explore and understand the political elements of their actions — for example, how to use their experiences as a resource for thinking about and understanding issues; and how to communicate what they learn to others in the context of public issues.

When it comes to classroom discussions, just having the chance to think about and discuss political issues in a variety of disciplines will enable students to see that politics extends beyond just being another "academic major." Recall the comments of the Morgan State man and the UC-Berkeley woman when discussing political education on campus in their respective groups. "I would like to talk about political issues in classes. That would be good because it lets us see how the world works on all kinds of issues," remarked the man. And the woman said, "No

matter what job you have, whether it's an engineer or whatever, you need to understand that you are doing something that might have consequences." Seeing the connection between their studies and politics is something that most students say is critical if they are to believe that politics is relevant to them.

AGENDA ITEM #2

Help students discover that politics *can* create change.

The history of the United States is filled with stories of citizens engaging in politics and pushing our society to ever-greater heights. Indeed behind a host of major political changes in this country are citizens. Whether national issues like the environment, civil rights, and labor laws, or local issues like crime in neighborhoods, long-term reform has often been reached by citizens coming together to act. Today, too, citizens are working in communities across the country to find ways to confront important issues — even in the face of anger and frustration that have led many citizens to feel "pushed out" of the political process.

Students need to come to know and understand examples of citizens working together to make a difference. They need to learn that politics can create change. They need to see that their elders *do* care. This, of course, is not the case today; a University of Michigan man said of older Americans, "they've quit caring." Many of his fellow students from across the nation share this view.

Students need to come to know and understand examples of citizens working together to make a difference.

All Americans must take on the responsibility for showing young people what politics can do. One opportunity is in the classroom, teaching students about past and present citizen action; the media also can play a role by making connections between citizen action and the challenges it seeks to address. Still another way that students might learn about politics is by connecting with older generations. More places need to be found where young people and adults can come together to discuss politics and engage in public life. Talking and working side by side with their elders, students will hear how politics can solve problems from real voices, they will be able to see firsthand that adults do care, and they will be able to experience politics at work.

AGENDA ITEM #3

Educate students about the roots of democracy.

Students need to learn that at the heart of the relationship of citizens to their society are choices.

At a time when nations around the world are moving toward democracy, students in these campus conversations seem to have little faith in America's political process; these voices suggest a lack of historical context for the roots of democratic politics. And yet the United States grew into a nation amid great debate — tackling tough choices about the appropriate roles of federal and state government, and of citizens themselves, in confronting problems and pursuing opportunities. This debate raged in newspapers, through correspondence, and in town squares. Today, students interviewed for this study say that they hear little discussion about the choices we face in acting on our problems — whether those choices are about far-reaching issues of governance, or seemingly more mundane issues like solid waste disposal. Instead, they say that newspapers and the airwaves are filled with finger pointing over perquisites of public office and the personal conduct of those who do or might hold office. Whatever debate does occur regarding political choices, the students with whom we talked seldom seem to hear.

These campus conversations suggest that students need to learn about the philosophical foundations of democracy and that this must consist of learning more than merely what is written in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, although this is surely important. Students need to learn that at the heart of the relationship of citizens to their society are choices. They need to learn the why behind the nation's founding principles and its current legislation. Equally important, they need to see the value of social compacts for democracy and why they are being sought by people all over the world. And, that by making political choices, citizens create social compacts delineating what is deemed to be important and how those areas of importance will be nurtured and maintained. They need to understand that the questions at the core of these compacts are ones that demand ongoing consideration; that citizens must constantly struggle to define themselves as a nation and a society. And that politics — talking through issues and making decisions with others — is part and parcel of this struggle.

AGENDA ITEM #4
Watch what we "say" about politics.

Everything that people say and do conveys a message; our actions and words are how we inform each other about the world. As a society, we place great importance on communication. Bookstore shelves, for instance, are lined with volumes that offer advice on how to communicate effectively at home and in the workplace. Communications is a field of study on many college campuses across the country. Specialists in communication fill the pages of professional directories. And the communication industry is growing by leaps and bounds. But when it comes to politics, these campus conversations suggest, we pay scant attention to the messages we are sending to students about politics and public life —or at least show little regard for the long-term consequences of the messages we do send. Many students have concluded from everything they see, hear, and experience that politics is, as the Morgan State woman was quoted earlier as saying, "just a big fraud." And now they want no part of politics.

The cynicism that is being passed on to the next generation must be countered if young people are to participate in politics.

The cynicism that is being passed on to the next generation must be countered if young people are to participate in politics. This study suggests that Americans — whether educators, the media, public officials, or citizens in general — need to talk about and approach politics in constructive terms. That does not mean we should not question wrong ideas or expose charlatans. But it does suggest that a broader perspective on politics must be offered by highlighting the possibilities that politics holds for addressing problems. Perhaps the media can help here through reporting on actions and ideas being tried and discussed. Public issues can be discussed in terms that matter to citizens. Public officials might play a role in such efforts by finding ways for citizens and themselves to interact in more constructive ways.

All Americans must recognize that their actions are being closely observed, and that the examples they set are being taken to heart by younger Americans. Just as all individuals pass on family and community traditions to their children, they pass on ways to practice politics. The responsibility for political education does not rest solely with schools. It rests with everyone. As a University of Michigan man

noted in an earlier discussion, "It starts with your role models."

AGENDA ITEM #5

Challenge students to take up politics.

Civic responsibility is a notion viewed in decidedly different terms by students and their elders. Citizens interviewed in *Citizens and Politics* have a clear sense of civic responsibility; they believe that they are an essential part of the political process and that, for it to work effectively, they must participate. The students in these campus discussions, on the other hand, seemed to view citizenship in terms of individual rights; they seldom named any civic responsibility beyond paying taxes. They made little, if any, connection between citizenship and politics.

The campus conversations suggest that students may be slow to take up politics because they do not believe that politics is relevant to their lives. This sense of alienation cannot be categorically explained by the old adage, "college-age years are just that time of life to ignore politics." This study suggests that many students have adopted the notion that they do not want to participate in politics as they now understand it. Still, students must realize that, at some point, they will be required to take change into their own hands. They cannot expect certain conditions to be met as a prerequisite for participating in the political process.

Appendix
A Note about Methodology

The Harwood Group used focus groups — or group discussions — to conduct this study. Focus groups were an ideal research method for this type of endeavor. They provided college students with the opportunity to think about various issues and topics over the course of a discussion, to talk about their views and feelings in their own words, and to describe the underlying assumptions behind their views. Moreover, this research technique helps to identify the language that college students use to talk about specific topics; and focus groups allow college students to react to new information and proposals during the course of discussion. Such interaction is difficult — often impossible — to obtain through public opinion surveys.

There are, of course, limitations to group discussion. The research is qualitative. Thus, the observations detailed in this report should not be mistaken for findings from a random sample survey. They are, technically speaking, hypotheses, or insights, that would need to be validated by reliable quantitative methods before being considered definitive. Still, the insights are suggestive of how citizens view politics and their relationship to it.

Each of the focus group discussions conducted for this study comprised approximately 12 students, representing a cross section of race, gender, and grade (all participants were undergraduates, between ages 18 and 24). The demographic breakdowns of students participating in this study, in these areas, are approximately: 65% white, 35% minority (one focus group was conducted at a historically

black institution and was comprised solely of African-Americans; with the exception of that focus group, the breakdown by race of the remaining groups is approximately 77% white, 23% other); 54% female, 46% male; and 24% freshman, 26% sophomores, 23% juniors, 27% seniors. Students who were involved in the campus discussions also represented a mix of academic majors, level of participation in campus and political activities, and level of financial assistance. The participants were recruited by a professional public opinion research firm in each location. Each discussion was held in facilities on campus, lasted for about two hours, and was led by a trained moderator. Participants were promised that their names would not appear in this report, in order to respect their privacy.

To ensure geographic, size, and public/private diversity in this study, ten focus groups were conducted across the nation on the following campuses:

Location	**Date 1991**
University of Michigan Ann Arbor, Michigan	April 18
Siena College Loudonville, New York	April 30
Wake Forest University Winston-Salem, North Carolina	May 1
Oklahoma State University Stillwater, Oklahoma	November 14
Gonzaga University Spokane, Washington	November 20
University of California-Berkeley Berkeley, California	November 21
Morgan State University Baltimore, Maryland (historically black institution)	December 9
Location	**Date 1992**
University of Minnesota Minneapolis, Minnesota	September 3
Florida State University Tallahassee, Florida	September 9
Colorado College Colorado Springs, Colorado	September 9

How College Students See Politics

College students in these campus discussions see only three ways to participate in the political process: individual actions such as voting, signing petitions, writing letters; joining interest groups; and protesting. But they fundamentally reject the political value of each of these. Indeed, many of these college students have concluded that politics is irrelevant:

"I think our political system is becoming impotent. It's becoming so partisan, the power of special interests, money, it's coming to the point where it seems to be losing its effectiveness."
— University of Michigan man

"It seems like government right now isn't made for today." — UC-Berkeley woman

"Politics might work to solve problems for some people, but it doesn't work for me."
— University of Minnesota woman

"Politics is irrelevant from my standpoint. I just don't think it's relevant for people like me."
— UC-Berkeley man

"The one thing that I've learned, to be quite honest, I can't change anything."
— Gonzaga University woman

"I just think it's a system I'd never want to be a part of." — University of Michigan woman

"As far as we know, the politics of this country is corrupt and has been corrupt since day one. So why should we contribute?" — Morgan State man

"When you get involved, politics is a real deflation." — Gonzaga University woman

"You have a generation slipping into a dream world. People are disillusioned, escaping... so you have people disappearing into the cracks."
— Florida State man

The Messages They're Hearing

College students participating in these campus discussions say they hear messages of pessimism about politics and the political process.

Message of Pessimism #1: The Sight of Indifference

The people students respect most are telling them that it is not important, or productive, to participate in the political process.

"It starts with your role models. You see that they've quit caring, so why should we care?"
— University of Michigan man

"It starts with your parents. If your parents don't care about politics, you're not going to care."
— University of Minnesota woman

Message of Pessimism #2: Legacy of Negative Campaigns

All that students associate with campaigns and elections is name-calling and backbiting, not the putting forth of ideas.

"The media are more concerned about who the candidate is sleeping with than what his stands are on economics."
— Florida State woman

"[Politicians] focus on emotional issues that push our buttons — not on issues."
— Colorado College woman

Message of Pessimism #3: Public Officials Only Placate the Public

College students believe that what they hear from public officials has little to do with what they ultimately do in the name of the public.

"It seems like all around election time here come these politicians promising things, then once elections are over they disappear."
— University of Michigan woman

"[Public officials] consider themselves the cultural elite. There's such a gap that politicians can't get themselves to meet the people at the bottom of the heap." — Florida State man

Message of Pessimism #4: Only the Financially Powerful Are Represented

Organized interests, with their money and influence, have locked-up the political process — college students do not see a role for citizens.

"There's a lot of special interest groups, and they represent somebody. But the amount of power they have is extremely unfortunate."
— UC-Berkeley man

"You can vote and all that, but the political system is rigged for special interests and corporations."
— University of Minnesota man

Message of Pessimism #5: Politics of the Extreme

Politics has stopped working. The only way to be heard is through protests.

"The L.A. riots, as bad as they were, were important. People would have dismissed [all the problems] if there wouldn't have been riots." — Florida State man

"Protests are extreme measures to use, but they get the most attention. And if no one listens, you have to take extreme measures."
— Morgan State man

The Response They Want

The college students in *College Students Talk Politics* say that new political practices are needed — practices that they do not associate with the political process today.

Political Practice #1: Understanding Issues

College students say that they and other citizens must be better informed on political issues if they are to be active participants in the political process.

"You need to have a clue about what's going on. You need to know about specific issues and also take a look at the big picture."
— Florida State man

"On most issues people see [the debate] as two ships passing in the night. If you don't know something about the issues, how are you supposed to figure out what's going on?"
— University of Michigan man

Political Practice #2: Seeing Different Perspectives

Understanding a full range of perspectives on issues is important, students argue, if political discussions are to be productive.

"Rather than hearing one person say something, it's kind of nice to hear both sides, it gives you the whole story."
— Wake Forest man

"We need to hear more choices of platforms of ideas, because we're not all the same kind of people. More [ideas] would represent more groups of people and then there could be trade-offs and compromises."
— Florida State man

Political Practice #3: Making Decisions with Others

Fundamental to the political process, students say, is the ability of people to work together toward a common goal.

"There needs to be more give and take, right now everybody wants to take."
— Morgan State man

"I think there needs to be more unity, and working together. That's what life is about."
— Florida State woman

Political Practice #4: Emphasizing Listening

Central to changing how politics is practiced is the need for better listening, these college students argue.

"This might sound stupid, but when people take a side and they get ticked off, they don't say what's on their mind. They just yell it, and if you yell something, no one listens to you."
— Wake Forest woman

"If we were to be a little more open-minded, and not so defensive, but actually listen and think about what other people say, maybe more would get done."
— Siena College man

Political Practice #5: Sensing that Participation Matters

College students say that if they do participate in the political process, they need a sense that their efforts will be worthwhile.

"We need to know that our ideas are going to be taken seriously. I don't mean we need to be making decisions, but just be involved in discussions." — UC-Berkeley man

"I think a lot of people would like to be involved, but they kind of get brushed-off."
— Oklahoma State woman

This study suggests college students will engage in politics, but only if it is a different kind of politics — one that challenges them to learn new political skills and provides opportunities to put those skills to use. More "politics as usual" will only deepen their sense of the irrelevance of the political process.

College Students Talk Politics

Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (513) 434-7300
444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016